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African American Men Who Give Voice to the Personal Transition from Criminality to Desistance

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AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN WHO GIVE VOICE TO THE PERSONAL TRANSITION FROM CRIMINALITY TO DESISTANCE

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Abstract

The United States of America has more than 2.3 million persons incarcerated in state and federal prisons. In 2011 more than 700,000 prisoners were released from prisons back into the communities, mostly urban, from where they came. Upon their attempt to reenter society, persons released from prison are faced with overwhelming odds threatening their successful reentry at every critical element necessary for life and wellbeing—food, housing, health care, treatment for drug addictions, employment, counseling, family support and close personal relationships. This research reflects the voices of African American men who tell their personal stories of criminal life, imprisonment, recidivism, and the point at which they turned from crime to desisting—breaking the cycle of recidivism. *African American Men Who Give Voice to the Personal Transition from Criminality to Desistance* discusses the attractions of criminal life, challenges to desisting and finally making it through society's unforgiving social, economic and political gauntlet. Narrative is story and narrative inquiry is a way to understanding and valuing lived experiences through story. Narrative inquiry methodology is the qualitative methodology used in reflecting the stories as voiced by the participants in this study. This dissertation is accompanied by 16 MP4 video files and a Dissertation Summary [PDF]. Six of the MP4 files are embedded in the Dissertation PDF and 10 are embedded in the Dissertation Summary. All are accessible as supplemental files. The electronic version of this dissertation is at *AURA* http://aura.antioch.edu/ and *OhioLink ETD* Center, www.ohiolink.edu/etd

Author's Video Introduction

DissClip 1.01 Author Introduction

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Chapter I: Introduction

Situating the Researcher

From a very young age a social justice consciousness has been the foundation of many of my actions. As a child of nine years old I did not know the words *social justice*, but my protests of unfairness and inequality were spoken loud and clear. My elders believed in the adage that children were to be seen and not heard so I was often shushed or punished for speaking out of turn or for "getting in grown folks' business," as my Aunt Annie Mae (steeped in the Black familial culture of Memphis, Tennessee) used to tell me.

I was raised in the City of Santa Monica, in a community of mostly African American and Mexican families, surrounded by middle to upper income affluence on "the other side of the boulevards." Santa Monica had only two junior high schools, one on each side of the boulevards, serving the diverse population within their boundaries, and one public high school whose student body also included all of the racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity from the entire city and, in addition, the surrounding unincorporated areas, including Malibu, CA.

In the 1950s and 60s it was not that Black youth in Santa Monica were unaware of racial hatred and bigotry because it was clear when you ventured out of your neighborhood to cross the boulevards that you were in a place where you were out of place. Racism was known and seen, but not imposed in such an overt way so that one could clearly call it racism or discrimination as one could in the South.

In Venice, CA where others of my family lived, discriminatory practices were more obvious; the area where Black people were allowed to live was small and densely populated. Blacks could rent or buy houses within a 1.5 square mile area but were restricted from ownership or even free movement outside the demarcation zone: California to the South, Rose Avenue to

the North, Lincoln Boulevard to the East, and Washington to the West (this street is now Abbot Kenny Avenue).

I am not certain of the exact point and time that the seasons of illusion changed for me. I just know that back then in the 1960s things changed, and I changed. As if a light bulb turned on, it was clear that we Black people were not equal and that our treatment, although not brutal, was nevertheless racist. I am sure our parents knew this to be true, but having come from the South (as I can think of no friends whose parents in our community were native Californians), they recognized that their California experiences were better than what they had left behind in states like Georgia and Tennessee, where my mother and father, respectively, were born and raised.

By the time I was 14, almost every Black male I knew had been stopped, while walking or driving, numerous times by the police and for no legitimate reason. The usual excuse given was, "You fit the description of someone who ____." The blank could be filled in with any illegal act because whatever charges the police chose to attach to the detained young Black man would not be challenged by any one. Almost every Black man in America, young or old, has been stopped by the police at some time in life for no apparent reason other than the fact of being a Black man. These racially motivated detainments were so wrong, so unfair, so humiliating. The Black victims of stop, frisk, interrogate (Alexander, 2012) police practices would lie sprawled on the ground as a call was made to determine if they were wanted criminals. It was not unusual for a Black male to be subjected to this injustice many times over by the same police—so often that the victim and the oppressor knew each other by name. When no record of warrants was found, the victim was released to go. This was the norm that fueled my ire and motivation to participate in activism, to right the wrongs of the world. At least, that was my

position then. Over time I realized I could not right the wrongs of the world, but the Civil Rights Movement gave me focus and helped me to shrink that impossibly large battle field of the world down to a community that was more geographically circumscribed, but whose social justice violations were no less of a challenge.

The Personal Imprint of Civil Injustice

1n 1957 Governor Orval Faubus of Little Rock, Arkansas opposed the desegregation of schools and called upon the National Guard to stop the Black students from entering Little Rock Central High School. Those Black students, who became known as the Little Rock Nine,[1]were the first to attempt the integration of all white schools following the overturn of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) in the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision. The 1896 Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruled that the separation of black and white people did not violate the Equal Protection Clause in the Constitution of the United States of America. Even though the case was in reference to the legal separation of Whites and Blacks in railroad cars, the law soon extended to all other public facilities, including restaurants, hotels, bathrooms, water fountains, and more.

I was eleven years old, and I watched the news on our black and white television, horrified at the sight of the police beating Black people with clubs, kicking men and women, dragging them in the street, all because they did not want White and Black children to attend school together. I could not understand how such hatred could exist. My mom, listening from the kitchen as she prepared dinner, spoke more to herself than to any of us in the living room, "They must be scared that the black is going to rub off our kids onto theirs."

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[1] Interestingly, and I think, fittingly, for a University based historically on social justice platforms, one of the Little Rock Nine, Professor Terrence Roberts, is an instructor at Antioch University, Los Angeles.

The iconic painting of a little Black girl being escorted to school by federal marshals hangs in my home. In 1963 Ruby Bridges, only six years old, was the first Black child to integrate William Frantz Elementary school in New Orleans. The Norman Rockwell painting depicts the visual image of the action taken by President Dwight Eisenhower in 1957, enforcing the desegregation of schools in compliance with the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v Board of Education* decision that separate is not equal.

The Civil Rights Movement was in full stride in 1963, ignited by the nationally televised attacks on Black people—men, women, and children in southern states. Not far from Governor Faubus in Arkansas was Eugene "Bull" Connor, Police Chief of Selma, Alabama. In the same year as the Little Rock Nine incident, Bull Connor ordered a brutal attack on peaceful anti-segregation protestors who had staged the march under the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. Protestors were met with fire houses, vicious dogs, and sticks. The world watched in horror, in disbelief that such hateful, brutal acts against people because of their color could occur in America. I was shivering with anger, and I cried for those brutalized people. The fear on their faces from the attacking dogs is etched in my memory to this day.

In that year, now a high school student, I was no longer just horrified, confused, and emotionally distraught. I was enraged. I saw the racism in my own community, far from Little Rock, Arkansas and far from Selma, Alabama. It was down the street, on the other side of the boulevard, and outside the 1.5 mile residential box. No, the scene was not as overtly brutal as the actions of Faubus or Connor; nevertheless, racism was making itself known in Santa Monica and Venice, California by way of harassment and arrest of young Black men. Law enforcement seemed to have reached across the country from southern states to California to form a common

allegiance against Black people who obviously needed to be reminded of their subservient place in society.

In 1963, during fourth period gym class, I looked up from the practice field toward the flag pole that rose high above the administration building. My heart stopped and so must have the hearts of everyone else on the field. It was as if we were of one consciousness, one paralyzed, disbelieving, state of mind as we stood frozen, watching our flag lowered to half-mast. The experience was surreal. I remember screaming and breaking out into a run, praying that it was not true. President Kennedy could not be dead. But it was true. November 22, 1963, President John F. Kennedy, 35th President of the United States was assassinated. He was a man who believed in civil rights. He was a man who, with his power and position as President of the United States, could have made life changes for Black people.

Nineteen sixty-three was a year of change for me. I came to know in that space and time, without question, that, first, I am Black and that that would never change. Skin color defined for white America who I am, and I determined that while I could not change that perception or my skin color, I would not let the Faubuses, Connors, or anti-civil rights assassins define my life with their toxic policies, practices, and laws designed to keep Black people "in their place." I knew that racism, discrimination, and injustice for all Black people should not exist.

I empathized with Angela Davis, Huey Newton, Stokely Carmichael, Eldridge Cleaver, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. They were all my Civil Rights Movement heroes during the 60s and 70s. I watched their troubled lives and their harassment on the television screen and read their stories of the fight and (in Angela's and Eldridge's cases, flight) for freedom. They fought for their personal civil rights as Black leaders in a country where the politically powerful (and manipulated) police authorities demonized their character. They fought for the rights for

free speech and equal opportunities for Black people, in general, to be free from oppression and discrimination. They were all labeled militant radicals and a danger to the United States of America. Their work convinced me that my heart and head were in the right place. I, too, needed to fight.

Race Identification: Black and African American

The l960s were a time of identity emergence for Black people who, in seeking to make a positive and strong statement and stand against racism and discrimination, found self-esteem and pride in identifying as Blacks rather than the race name of Negro, the description commonly used in the decades prior to the 1960s. Music and movements, protest marches, and sit-ins stoked passions and resolve as James Brown's song *I'm Black and I'm Proud* became a chant across the country. Natural hair styles, African attire, and organizations, such as the Black Panther Party, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Fannie Lou Hamer, and a host of others helped energize and support the movements, the legislation, and policies that ushered in the social, political, and legislative changes.

With the social changes, policy development, and implementation, legislation that evolved from the civil rights struggles, the change from Black to African American appears subtle and unremarkable and is still used interchangeably within the racial group and society, in general. I think as a people we began to feel more a part of the American society, more integrated into the world and less segregated, and we recognized the undeniable significance of the myriad of contributions to building the United States of America. The adaptation to African American seems to have coincided with these cultural and societal and psychological changes

within the race. For me, during several trips to West Africa I saw many cultural practices and ways of doing and being that were exactly as things were with my grandmother in rural Georgia. For example, my grandmother made soap that is called black soap in Africa, she built a fire under a huge tub and washed our clothing, she shopped in the woods for herbs and made poultices and teas to keep us well, and she collected rain water for drinking and cooking. All these things and more I saw in the villages in Senegal and Gambia, and I realized that my roots and the roots of Black people in America were deep in African soil; thus, African American resonates with me and my view of my race in America.

Despite the numerous obstacles and attacks that society has mounted against African Americans since slavery, we believe that the African American family has found creative ways to survive, retain some of its African values and structure, and fulfill its functions to this society. (Marbley & Rouson, 2011, p. 2).

. In my grandmother I saw the history of African ancestry and the quiet strength and resilience of a survivor. It is not uncommon, based on the generation in which a person is born, that different descriptions to identify race are used, such as Negro, Black, African American or even, colored or person of color.

Activism Uncovers a Deep Social Problem

In the aftermath of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, restless and frustrated at the lack of change in employment opportunities, affordable housing, the economic environment, and poverty conditions in urban areas and cities across America, African Americans were volatile and poised to explode into civil rebellion. In the summer of 1965, the South Los Angeles community of Watts was tense from the arrest of a Black woman and her two sons. The tension strained under the unyielding anger of the crowd, and pandemonium broke loose. The riots

railed for six days, leaving 43 dead, hundreds arrested, and thousands injured in the clash between the residents and the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department. The National Guard was called in to quell the riots and to maintain order. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. came to Watts to broker peace and to set the platform for continuing dialogue among the Watts community leadership, city officials, and law enforcement. Advocating a peaceful means of dealing with the dire economic conditions in the community, Dr. King advised President Lyndon B. Johnson to approve federal funding for anti-poverty programs for Watts and other similarly situated ghetto communities.

The United States government was eager to stave off similar explosions of community rage and conflict with law enforcement so government funding was proposed for urban communities across the country during the summer of 1966. The federal Department of Labor announced funding for Summer Crash Programs—programs that could quickly be developed to receive funds for implementation over the three months of summer.

I had raised the voice that my aunt used to shush when I was a little girl, and I had made known my discontent with social injustices throughout the community. I was approached by community organizers to put my ideas for community development and change in writing. In response to the Department of Labor solicitation, I wrote about the need for job training and development, adult basic education, improved recreation facilities and programs, improved police-community relations, and funding for beautification projects. To my surprise (and glee), the proposal was funded and the Project Action Program created.

Project Action was designed to employ residents of the Venice community in the administration of the job training program and to provide stipends to those attending the training. A director, secretary, accountant, and project manager were hired to run the program. I was the

project manager and headed the training programs that included job search techniques, mock interviews, resume development, effective communication, and community development and advocacy. Focus groups were held weekly to discuss ideas for community improvements, and teams were sent into the community to survey residents for their ideas and opinions regarding improvements and beautification of the area. The participants were paid minimum wage and were required to attend the classes and to participate in program activities every day. Project Action became the central organizing body and manager of community development programs for improving the lives of individuals and the Black community.

As I recall, the initial participant make up was about 60 people, all Black, and about 25 of the group were men. A majority of the men were periodically absent or late from mandatory program activities with the explanation that they had to see their parole or probation officer. For participants to receive payment for absences, verification of legitimate reason for absences was required. Appointment notices and/or proof of attendance at a meeting in their office confirmed that nearly all of these men, ages 18-30, had been arrested, convicted of a crime, and sentenced to probation or parole. A few had served time in jail, youth authority or prison. I was disturbed and frustrated, but not surprised, by the significant number of men with criminal histories; after all, the majority of the Venice population was Black and police-community relations were no different than in any other Black community. Yet I could not believe that it was acceptable for all these men to be in the criminal justice system. This was 1966, two years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Why were Black men still disproportionately arrested, convicted, and sentenced more than any other race?

Purpose of the Study

According to the Bureau of Justice Report, the state prison population in the United States declined in 2012 for the third consecutive year, from 1,615,487 prisoners in 2009 to 1,571,013 prisoners at year-end 2012; the effects of the decrease are minimal, considering the fact that the United States has the largest prison population in the world. The Bureau of Justice Statistics 2011 report (Carson & Sabol, 2011) indicates the number of persons incarcerated in prisons in the United States as 2,239,800 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2012). In total, including persons on probation, parole, or institutional supervision, the Adult Correctional Authorities supervised about 6,977,700 offenders at year end 2011. African American men are imprisoned eight times the rate of white men—about 12% of African American men between the ages of 20 and 30 are currently incarcerated in America (Carson & Sabol, 2011).

Further, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP] Criminal Justice Fact Sheet (NAACP, 2013) reports a number of facts documenting the disproportionate numbers of African American men and women in the criminal justice system. To list a few:

- African American men, in 2008, constituted nearly 1 million of the total 2.3 million incarcerated.
- African Americans are incarcerated nearly six times the rate of whites.
- African Americans represent 12% of the total population of drug users; 38% arrested for drug offenses and 59% in state prison.
- One in 100 African American women are in prison.

- Nationwide, African Americans represent 26% of juvenile arrests, 44% of youth who are detained, 46% of youth who are judicially waived to criminal court, and 58% of the youth admitted to state prisons. (Miles, 2008)

Needless to say, the number of African Americans imprisoned is disproportionate. Think of all the implications the incarceration of such huge numbers of African American males have for our society, communities, families, and future. It is mentally staggering. I am passionate about the plight of African American men who are or have been incarcerated in prisons and correctional institutions in the United States. The United States has more prisoners than any other country in the world, including China and Russia. The mass incarceration of prisoners, disproportionately African American, has made prisons among the largest of American industries. Addressing in an interview the concept of the prison-industrial complex, Mark Karlin, journalist, (Karlin, 2013) with Marc Mauer, Executive Director of *The Sentencing Project* and author of the book *Race to Incarcerate* defined the book as an indictment of a system that "locks the poor and minorities up with abandon, while largely neglecting support systems for reintegration back to society." In answer to Karlin's question of how to get the discussion of mass incarceration out of politics, Marc Mauer (2009) responded that the demand for change and the political environment conducive to support the change must be in place. To achieve this place of political comfort, Mauer, stated the following:

> To do so we need diverse voices to make the argument. Key, of course, is leadership from communities most affected by mass incarceration, including those who have experienced it directly. (p. 4)

Legislation and penal policy has resulted in increased admissions into the prison system and longer stays (Alexander, 2012; Martinson, 1974; Mauer, 2009). The combination of these two factors initiates and sustains harsher and more severe sentencing of prisoners, effectively

producing the mass incarceration of prisoners in America and, consequently, exponentially disproportionate increases in imprisonment of African American men and men of color. Communities suffer tremendously as a result of the disproportionate incarceration of men, leaving communities without male parental influences, role models, family structure, and monetary support, as well as tending to undermine informal social control (Leverentz, 2011). Given the large numbers of incarcerated individuals and eventually released prisoners and the associated consequences, should force the criminal justice system to rethink the punitiveness of sentencing, to begin considering rehabilitation strategies, and to involve communities and families in the reentry processes for released prisoners (Marbley & Ferguson, 2005).

Even with harsher and longer sentences, most of those imprisoned return to society at some point (Foster, 2001; The Pew Center on the States, 2011; Thompson, 2008; Travis, 2001). The released prisoners are victims of deeply embedded political penal and social systems in America that bind them in an intractable life of condemnation and second class social structure of joblessness, homelessness, mental illness, ineligibility for government support programs, such as food stamps, and ineligibility to vote (Thompson, 2008). They are locked into insurmountable debt from unpaid restitution imposed by the courts and threatened with criminalization for unpaid child support, making them ineligible for a driver's license and subject to re-incarceration if fines and fees are not paid.

In spite of all of these and other draconian obstacles, some released prisoners successfully run the gauntlet of barriers, desist from criminal activity, and experience freedom from recidivism; although, as with the men in this study, it sometimes takes a number of cycles of incarceration and recidivism before reentry is successful.

Researchers, criminologists, social workers, psychologists, and others interested in discovering the causes of criminal behavior are also interested in the termination of criminal behavior—or desistance from crime. With more than 2.3 million people incarcerated in the United States and statistics showing that a large number of released prisoners will be arrested within the first six months of release. The Pew Center on the States (Pew), in its April 2011 Report, *State of Recidivism: The Revolving Door of America's Prisons* defines recidivism as "the act of reengaging in criminal offending despite having been punished" (p. 7). This report uses the expanded definition to include re-incarceration in jail or prison for a technical violation, such as parole violation or a new crime. Recidivism rates differ from state to state, but, typically, released prisoners are followed for a three-year period during which time any acts of reoffending are tracked. About two-thirds of released prisoners are rearrested within three years of release, and approximately 50% of all released offenders are re-incarcerated in that same period of time (LaVigne, 2006). Finding ways to reduce recidivism and better understand the processes of desistance is critical to building and sustaining the social constructs of individuals, families, and communities.

In attempting to define the term desistance from crime, it seems elementary enough to refer to the dictionary's definition of *desist*—to stop doing something. Therefore, simply defined, desistance from crime means to stop committing criminal acts. However, delving into the thick of the literature, it soon becomes apparent that desistance is not so simply explained or understood. The perspective of desistance as a process rather than a discrete action is common. (Bushway, Piquero, Broidy, Cauffman, & Maerolle, 2001). Bushway, et al. (2001) define desistance as "the process of reduction in the rate of offending (understood conceptually as an estimate of criminality) from a nonzero level to a stable rate empirically indistinguishable from

zero" (p. 500). A scientific look at desistance as a process generates provocative questions, e.g. when does crime start (the onset), over what period of time does it occur (maintenance), and when does it stop (desistance) (Bushway, Thornberry, & Krohn, 2003; Maruna, 2008; Maruna, LeBel, Mitchell, & Naples, 2004; Warr, 1998). These three stages: onset, maintenance, and desistance, are known as the life course transitions of criminal behavior (Bushway et al., 2003; Laub & Sampson, 2001).

Indicators of the onset of criminal acts are available by way of citations for minor offenses, e.g., truancy, warrants for unpaid traffic tickets, arrest records, time spent in jail, state or federal prisons, and so on. Desistance from crime, on the other hand, is more difficult to identify. Some argue that desistance is likely intermittent—an off and on offending with periods of time (desistance) in between criminal offenses (Maruna, 2008). In this viewpoint, desistance begins at the end of the criminal act; for example, when the act of robbing the bank is complete and the criminal act is no longer in play (Maruna, 2008). This explanation suggests that desistance from crime is discrete; however, desistance may only be temporary. If another criminal act is committed, no matter the time in between, has the offender really desisted? This question forms the basis of the ongoing research and emerging theories that seek to define desistance from crime (Bushway et al., 2001; Farrington, 2007; Giordano, Cernkovick, & Rudolph, 2002; Massoglia & Uggen, 2007).

Maruna (2001) introduces another viewpoint for consideration in that he believes the definition of desistance as "needs to emphasize *maintenance* (italics added) rather than termination"; i.e., attaining and maintaining a state of non-offending. He discusses desistance in the context of personal reform or change, describing it as, "relinquishing an old self and inventing a new one." Even so, there are many factors and circumstances that can influence

change (Farrall & Shapland, 2010; Farrington, 1997; Giordano, 2002; Maruna, 2001; Warr, 1998), and change occurs slowly and over a long period of time, usually, a life time (Maruna, 2008).

Developmental and life-course (DLC) theories "attempt to view and explain the development and progression of offending over age, explain the influence of risk and protective factors at different ages and the effects of life events on the course of development" (Farrington, 2007, p. 125).

Depending on the researcher and/or theorist, explanations of desistance and contributory factors to the process of desistance differ somewhat. What does not differ is the common theme of life changes over time. Whether the change is due to ties to informal institutions, such as marriage and employment (Sampson & Bartusch, 1998; Sampson, Laub, & Wimer, 2006) or changes due to opportunities, costs, attachments, and bonding (Catalano, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004), or various constraints and maturation (Sampson & Laub, 2003), all serve to support the fact that the reasons for and explanation of desistance continue to be researched and defined principally through the lens and interpretations of the researcher.

The Gap in the Research

Much has been written about barriers to successful reentry, recidivism, and the multitude of reasons ex-offenders are returned to prison. I will discuss these assumptions, theories, and hypotheses in Chapter II, including prominent and seminal research from Giordano, Leverentz, Maruna, Petersilia, Travis, Sampson, and Laub, and others who have conducted extensive criminological studies concerning ex-offenders' reentry, recidivism, and desistance. What I find missing or at least very limited in these studies is a specific focus and study of the reentry and recidivism experiences of African American men, the most disproportionately arrested and

incarcerated race in America, and their personally voiced lived experiences, self-examination of behaviors, point and reason for change, and transitions from criminality to desistance. Therein, from my perspective and search of the literature, is the void in the research. It is my position that the fact that African American men make up the largest number of prisoners in the state and federal prisons of America that should create some level of interest and curiosity to research the reasons for and the effects of criminality and incarceration specifically on this population.

Persons who identify themselves in the Census as Only Black are 13.1% of the total United States population, and those who identify themselves as "Black and Other" are 14.1% of the population (http://blackdemographics.com/population/black-city-population). African American men comprise approximately 36% of the state and federal prison populations in the United States (Carson & Sabol, 2011). The disproportionate number of Blacks and Hispanics arrested and incarcerated over the past four decades has initiated and popularized discussions regarding the phenomenon of mass incarcerations in which many view the U.S. prison system as the new plantations and deem the high rates of incarceration as modern slavery.

Certainly the disproportionate number of incarcerated African American men warrants particular attention and study. Obtaining an understanding of how, in spite of the social, economic, and political conditions peculiar to African Americans, some are able to successfully surmount these conditions and other barriers to reenter and become desisters after release from prison is valuable to community activists, such as me and others, who advocate for social justice on an individual, community, or global basis.

Any one of the barriers mentioned in the Purpose of the Study section can break the resolve of a recently released prisoner or ex-offender to desist from crime, especially one who has been on the streets for a while and is unable to stabilize his life. An ex-offender faces

multiple barriers to successful reentry. Housing, employment, personal relationships, health care, transportation, re-socialization to a changed environment, reintegration into family and community, no money and no means to acquire any; these are formidable challenges for all former prisoners and ex-offenders. If these basic needs cannot be met, the likelihood of re-arrest and imprisonment is high. Langan and Levin (2002) reported two-thirds of released prisoners are re-arrested within the first three years of their release; 50 % of this group is re-incarcerated.

The Bureau of Justice, The Sentencing Project, the National Institute for Justice, and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation produce voluminous reports and statistical information based on gender, age, racial group, entry dates, exit dates, recidivism rates, and more. There are no final answers, generalizable theories, or models for what really works. The study of desistance is relatively new to the criminal justice field; because most studies focus on the length of the follow up period, there is still much to be learned about desistance (Glueck & Glueck, 1950; Sampson & Laub, 2003; Warr, 1998). The encouraging consideration is that there is an increasing interest and evolution in the studies to determine why offenders desist from criminal activity, how desistance is best defined, what the factors are that contribute to desistance, and more.

In my dissertation the narratives of the personal experiences of African American men provide an opportunity to hear what is in the hearts and minds of individuals who are persons that make up the over six million people in America that have criminal records, leaving them disenfranchised and marginal in our society.

Research Question

My research topic is *African American Men Who Give Voice to the Personal Transition From Criminality to Desistance (*which I will refer to as *Voices* throughout the paper*)*. My

research question: What are the stories that reflect the experiences of men who have lived many years of their lives entrenched in negative behaviors and criminality and served prison sentences, returned home to face all of the personal hardships and social barriers of reentry, and, yet, were successful? Who better to answer than the formerly incarcerated who have managed to make the eventual transition from criminality to desistance, finally freeing themselves from the cycle of recidivism?

Supplemental questions that may help better define or expound upon the research question for participants are as follows: How does an ex-offender survive in America when the legal means, tools, and resources necessary for survival have been taken away? What are the key factors necessary for the transformation of a felon who has returned to prison multiple times to a person who has managed to remain free, i.e. desist, from re-arrest and re-incarceration for more than three years?

The dissertation interprets the stories of the ways and means of men who overcame unfathomable barriers, the habits of a criminal lifestyle as these men attempt to reenter their communities and society after multiple jail and prison terms, and the soul searching revelations that lead to the point of their turning away from crime and staying free.

When I began my studies at Antioch University in the PhD in Leadership and Change program, the professors gave me and the other students this advice: study something about which you are passionate—your interest and energy will be sustained when you are passionate about a subject, and it will make the writing of your dissertation easier. I gave that advice a lot of thought, and my interest and intrigue in the subject of African American men and desistance from crime has not waned.

There is a relative paucity of research in the area of desistance and with good reason—research in this area has grown steadily over the past 20 years; however, there was not much interest during the 1940s and 1950s in why criminals quit offending (Farrall & Maruna, 2004). The vast number of prisoners released back into society has raised this issue of desistance to a level of public policy interest for a number of reasons; safety and financial impacts on communities are key among the reasons.

The point at which ex-offenders make the personal decision to stop their criminal behavior and the ways and means by which they proceed to this end is not well understood. *Voices* focuses on these areas. Personal interviews and focus groups were held with African American men who have served multiple prison terms in a state or federal prison, and since their last release from prison, according to their testimony, have stopped committing crimes.

Summary of Chapters to Follow

In Chapter II the modern history of the prison system and prisoner sentencing and the resultant disproportionate imprisonment of African American men are discussed. Particular focus is placed on prisoner reentry, the challenges of reintegration, the personal struggles to successfully desist from criminal behavior and avoid re-arrest and re-incarceration. I discuss the current research and evolving efforts to address the societal impacts of persons released from prisons and the effects of reentry on family and community, recidivism, and society's contribution to the failure of ex-offender reentry efforts and the difficulties of desistance—both for the researcher and the reformed offender.

In Chapter III I describe the personal transitions from criminality to desistance spoken by ex-offenders as I sought via narrative inquiry to determine what factors contributed to successful desistance from crime and recidivism. Is there a common theme, ideal, revelation, internal

occurrence that manifests in these individuals—a critical or significant event—that created the change in behavior and allowed them to find their way to long-term freedom? Was it spiritual? Was it fear? Was it family or other personal relationship? I discuss the limited body of work that investigates, from the point of view of the reformed offender, not only the onerous barriers that challenge their efforts to integrate but also the personal experience of how they overcame the many social and economic barriers, as well as resist the temptation to continue offending, to finally reach the point of desistance and beyond.

In Chapter IV, through personal interviews and focus group discussions, African American men tell their stories of criminal histories, multiple arrests, recidivism, incarceration and their prison experiences, the mindful decision to change their lives, and the personal transition from a life of crime to a life of desisting from criminal activity.
Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Analyses and interpretations of the interviews revealed some common, self-described causations of criminal behaviors as well as themes of personal transition and desistance that emerged from the narrative stories of the participants.

In Chapter V I discuss the study: the theories and concepts, the causes and choices of criminal behavior, and narrative inquiry as social science methodology. In Chapter VI I discuss the implications of the study for leadership and change.

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

In this chapter I research the contributions of researchers to the body of works in the field of criminology with focus on three areas: reentry/reintegration, recidivism, and desistance. Released prisoners are attracting increased attention from government, corrections institutions, communities, and social agencies that are feeling the financial and social services impacts of the overwhelming number of persons released back into mostly urban communities. These communities statistically have the highest arrest rates, no employment opportunities for ex-offenders, limited housing, and, generally, inadequate social services. I discuss punitiveness in prisoner sentencing, mass incarceration, disproportionate arrest and imprisonment of African American men, multiple barriers encountered by released prisoners, the cycle of recidivism, and transitions to desistance.

The principal objective of this research effort is to delve into personal criminal lives and to record the stories of struggles and triumphs of reformed offenders who successfully desisted from criminal behavior and overcome temptations to revert to previous criminality and recidivism. With this goal in mind, I discuss the limited research on ex-offender turning points and desistance efforts. I identify research and theories relevant to the development of practices and policies to address the social impacts of criminal behaviors, including a discussion of age graded theory of informal social control, what works for reentry, whether desistance is discrete or a process, and other theories and practices focusing on key contemporary issues in criminology and society's response to the penalization of crime and punishment.

The United States of America has more prisoners than any other country in the world. Political ambition and campaign platforms to get tough on crime in the 1960s and 1970s encouraged the passage of legislation and policies for more punitive laws and harsher sentencing.

These Draconian changes, supposedly introduced to combat the trending violence in the urban cities of America and assure citizens that government was effectuating law and order, resulted in a 500% increase in prison populations (Jones & Mauer, 2013; Tonry, 1999, 2006). The implementation of these laws led to the unprecedented building of more prisons across the country (Guerino, Harrison, & Sabol, 2011).

The political climate in the late 1960s derided the sentencing laws as too liberal; too many criminals were going free, and prisons, in theory, focused on rehabilitation of prisoners instead of punishment to deter future criminal behavior. An endorsement of this characterization was the result of a survey in which evaluations of 231 studies on offender rehabilitation were conducted. The evaluations were conducted from 1945 to 1967, and the research team reviewed and analyzed the data from1968 to 1970. Although the study was authored by Douglas Lipton and co-authored by Judith Wilks, it was sociologist Robert Martinson (who joined the study well into its progression) who was famously associated with the study which alleged the ineffectiveness of rehabilitation measures in the penal system (Sarre, 2001). Using the title *What Works? Questions and Answers about Prison Reform,* Martinson published his interpretation of the study without his colleagues in 1972. In an unusual four part series in the liberal *New Republic*, Martinson wrote, "the represent array of correctional treatments has no appreciable effect—positive or negative—on rates of recidivism of convicted offenders." In the conservative magazine the *Public Interest* he wrote, "rehabilitative efforts that have been reported so far have no appreciable effect on recidivism" (Miller, 1989, p. 1).

Martinson's report got the attention and the support of liberals and conservatives—liberals who saw his position as a worthy argument against indeterminate sentencing which was thought to be subject to racial discrimination by judges and parole boards

and appealing to conservatives because the study strengthened their position against the philosophy of rehabilitative measures for prisoner reform. For all of its rhetoric against rehabilitation, the report came to be known as Nothing Works which became the mantra of political campaigners with get tough on crime ambitions.

On January 18, 1989, the U.S. Supreme Court in *Mistretta v. United States* upheld federal sentencing guidelines which remove considerations for rehabilitation in the sentencing of offenders. "Defendants will henceforth be sentenced strictly for the crime with no recognition given to such factors as amenability to treatment, personal and family history, previous efforts to rehabilitate oneself, or possible alternative to prison" (p. 1). Thus began the three decades—and counting—of punitiveness in the prison system wherein harsher sentences and longer terms of imprisonment became the order for all prisons. These laws had the causal effect of greater admissions to the prison system, particularly and disproportionately, African American men.

Once they enter the prison system, many offenders tend to become locked in a cycle of arrest, conviction, incarceration, release, and reentry. Unfortunately, two-thirds of ex-offenders released from prison fail to desist from crime and according to the Bureau of Statistics Report 2010, are rearrested within six months of release and are returned to prison within three years. (Foster, 2001; Goodstein, 1979; Loza, MacTavish, & Loza-Fanous, 2007; Petersilia, 2004; Schnur, 1948).

The early 1980s and the impact of tough-on-crime legislation, such as the Rockefeller Drug Laws, marks the onset of the mass incarceration of prisoners in the United States and, subsequently, the release of thousands of prisoners back into their communities. Faced with this ominous social issue, researchers have begun to concentrate on attempting to effectively deal with ex-offender recidivism, as well as the impacts to released prisoners, their families and the

communities as released prisoners attempt reentry and reintegration into mainstream society. However, there is a gap in the available research. Very little attention has been paid to those ex-offenders who succeed in reentering society, avoiding re-incarceration. The released prisoner who is looking for ways to reenter and reintegrate is ironically the victim of the corrections, political, and social systems that hold him accountable, under the threat of violation of his parole for good behavior but is incapable of helping him make a viable reentry. Instead, he is offered only restricted access to shelter, subsidies for food, medical treatment, and other social services. Employment opportunities are next to none (Roman & Travis, 2006; Thompson, 2008; Travis, 2005). Considering these formidable barriers to reentry, how do some offenders manage to make the transition from criminality to desistance? That is the principal question addressed in this study.

While there is an on-going search for solutions to the problems of recidivism and many ideas and practices are discussed by various researchers, theorists, criminologists, and social workers, no particular research theory, treatment, or practice has yet evolved that can consistently bring about and sustain desistance from crime.

Following is a discussion of ideologies, theories, and practices integral to the criminology body of work concerning recidivism and the social, economic, and political effects resulting from the incarceration and release of prisoners, to include the following:

- significant contributions to research and literature, e.g., the research of Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck—groundbreaking research that led to one of the most influential theories in the field, the age-graded progression of criminality;
- discussion of the work of Robert Sampson and John Laub, which is largely based on the Gluecks's data, on the life-course theory of criminality;

- discussion of Joan Petersilia's work on what works in reentry and the mass incarceration in the United States as a result of political and legislative actions that support harsher and longer sentences; and
- the thought provoking research of Maruna regarding desistance as a discrete or on-going process.

The Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck Longitudinal Study: Seminal Research

Early attempts to understand criminality and desistance have influenced much of the research that has followed**.** In their book *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency (1950),* Harvard Professors Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck proposed that criminality was a behavioral transformation that occurred over time. Their longitudinal studies charted the changes in criminal behavior over a period of years from childhood to adolescent delinquency to early adulthood and led to the theory of age-graded informal social control as explanation of anti-social behaviors occurring over the span of years (1950).

Robert J. Sampson and John H. Laub (1993) decoded and analyzed the Gluecks's (1950) donated extensive case files and data of the 1,000 subjects (500 former inmates of the Massachusetts Reformatory and a control group of 500 non-delinquents) and the 18-year follow up of those subjects produced by the Gluecks. Based on this analysis, Sampson and Laub developed two separate concepts:

1) Effective child rearing is important in fostering self-control in early childhood, and self-control is critical in avoidance of criminal behavior;

2) The effect and influence of social controls, including employment, housing, and marriage can change the course of criminality—even for individuals with a history of early childhood criminality.

Sampson and Laub (1993) took exception to some of the Gluecks's research (1950), for example, their data asserting childhood criminal behavior was a predictor of criminal behavior in adults. They also disagreed with the Gluecks's assertion that the remedy to criminal acts was incarceration.

Further, in reference to generalizability of the findings upon which their theory was developed, Sampson and Laub (1993) noted an attribute of the Gluecks' (1950) data that is relevant to social views of the criminality of African Americans. There were no minorities, Blacks, or others included in the Gluecks's longitudinal studies. The absence of such data was noted as follows:

> For example, today we often hear discussions of crime that assume criminal behavior is inevitably linked to race and drugs. Yet crime in the historical context we are analyzing was not committed primarily by blacks but rather by members of white ethnic groups in structurally disadvantaged positions. And even though drugs were not pervasive, crime and alcohol abuse were quite rampant. The men in the Gluecks's delinquent sample were persistent, serious offenders, and many of them can be labeled in contemporary language as career criminals. Therefore, the fact that sample members were drawn from settings of social and economic disadvantage, yet were all white, provides an important comparative base for assessing current concerns of race, crime, and the underclass. (Kotlowitz as cited in Sampson & Laub, 1993, p. 3)

The Gluecks's (1950) work and the research by Sampson and Laub (1993) were quite influential. This body of work provided the launching point for many criminologists, sociologists, researchers, and practitioners who sought answers to reasons for criminal activities. Much of the research that followed built upon the analyses and interpretation of the data sets and theories from the Gluecks's studies and Sampson and Laub's (1993) seminal work *Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points through Life.* Given the absence of African American men in the Gluecks's study, it is clear that a significant population in America and the adversities which may have contributed to their imprisonment went unaddressed.

During the 1950s when the Gluecks performed their research, segregation and race discrimination were still practiced and legal in the United States. Even after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed racial discrimination, African Americans are disproportionately arrested, convicted, and incarcerated. What would the Gluecks's (1950) data look like if African Americans had been included in their studies? How would the inclusion of that data influence the analyses and theory developed by Sampson and Laub (1993)?

Researchers continue to use the Gluecks's (1950) study and the analyzed data and subsequent studies produced by Sampson and Laub (1993) as their platform for understanding and developing theories of criminality, without acknowledging that their theories and findings cannot be generalized to a population that was not represented in the studies. This is a grave and basic flaw in the literature.

Reentry

The research and study of prisoner reentry is a comparatively new venture in criminology, but it is becoming more important among scholars and practitioners because of the large number of prisoners being released (Carson & Sabol, 2011; Travis, 2001) and the resulting impacts to social, economic, and political structures in our society. While much has been done, research on reentry is in an early stage, and discussion is ongoing on how best to define reentry and reintegration. Anthony Thompson (2008) offers the following definition: "the process by which individuals return to communities from prison or jail custody" (p. 1). That definition seems simple enough; however, when the processes are reviewed, there are many steps, people, and agencies involved in reentry, and the rules and roles are changing. The released prisoner who is looking to reenter the free world and reintegrate with family and community easily becomes entangled in the corrections, political, and social systems that are ill prepared to provide

the assistance and resources the ex-offender needs to be successful, i.e. shelter, employment, medical treatment, and other social services (Roman & Travis, 2006; Thompson, 2008; Travis, 2005).

Joan Petersilia, retired professor of criminology and well known researcher in criminal justice reform, discusses some of the processes involved in reentry (2004). She suggests that proper assessments, family involvement, literacy training, and job training can help offenders reenter and avoid further criminality. She concludes, however, that what works is still generally undefined among criminal justice practitioners and researchers.

In a recent research collaboration John R. Hipp and colleagues Joan Petersilia and Susan Turner published a study, *Parolee Recidivism in California: The Effect of Neighborhood Context and Social Service Agency Characteristics* (2010). This study showed that close proximity and easy access to social service providers by parolees seemed to help reduce recidivism, particularly among the African American parolees. They noted, however, that service providers were overstretched and having difficulty meeting the needs of the reentering parolees. Further, their research showed that the proximity of liquor stores and bars, and what the research defined as "higher levels of disadvantage and disorder" contributed significantly to recidivism. In the end, the research was about what did not work. Still, the study was useful because it contributed new information about what could work to assist parolees in the reentry process.

Jeremy Travis, renowned researcher in criminology, talked about processes in ex-offender reform in his work *But They All Come Back: Facing the Challenge of Prisoner Reentry* (2001). Travis pointed out that since there are 2.3 million persons incarcerated in jails and prison (Carson & Sabol, 2011), it is inevitable that our society will have to cope with very large numbers of offenders in our midst. Travis advocated for mandatory transitional programs and

oversight for the released prisoners, including transitional housing (half-way house), post-release supervision by the parole agent, drug treatment, and counseling. He viewed these types of transitional programs as strategies for ensuring public safety. Travis criticized weakened entry management processes and underfunded parole agencies that generally serve as a means to re-incarcerate, not reintegrate.

Hipp et al. (2010), Petersilia (2004), Thompson (2008), Travis (2001), and others in the criminology, psychology, and sociology fields have focused heavily on processes and mechanisms to facilitate behavioral changes. Their studies indicate that some of these methods do produce theoretical models of what works for some offenders. No particular method has proven to be generalizable on a large scale, and none seem to get to the heart of the matter—the *it factor* within that sparks the change. The research discussions do not deal with the how and the why of the personal transformation that is fundamental to change and desistance.

Recidivism and Desistance

In 2010 there were more than 2.3 million persons incarcerated in the United States, and more than 700,000 prisoners were released to come back to their communities. Recidivism rates differ from state to state. Typically released prisoners are followed for a three-year period during which time any acts of reoffending are tracked. About two-thirds of released prisoners are rearrested within three years of release, and approximately 50% of all released offenders are re-incarcerated in that same period of time (LaVigne, 2006). Patrick A. Langan and David J. Levin (2002) released the largest recidivism study every conducted in the United States. Of the 272,111 prisoners released in 1994, 67% had committed at least one serious crime within the three years following the study, and 52% were re-incarcerated within the three years either for a new crime or for parole violation. Finding ways to reduce recidivism and better understand the processes of

desistance is critical to building and sustaining the social constructs of individuals, families, and communities.

What contributes to the personal decision and transformation of an individual who desists from crime? The scientific look at desistance as a process generates provocative questions, e.g. when does crime start (the onset), over what period of time does it occur (maintenance), and when does it stop (desistance) (Bushway et al., 2003; Maruna et al., 2004; Warr, 1998). These three stages— onset, maintenance, and desistance —are known as the life course transitions of criminal behavior (Bushway et al., 2003; Laub & Sampson, 2001; Warr, 1998).

Some argue that desistance is likely intermittent—off and on offending with periods of time (desistance) in between criminal offenses. Shadd Maruna (as cited in Warr 1998) proposes that desistance begins at the end of the criminal act; for example, when the act of robbing the bank is complete, desistance begins at the time the criminal act is no longer in play. This explanation suggests that desistance from crime is discrete; however, if another criminal act is committed, no matter the time in between, has the offender really desisted? Maruna (2001) discusses another viewpoint in which desistance should emphasize maintenance of desisting rather than termination of criminal acts, i.e., attaining and maintaining a state of non-offending. He discusses desistance in the context of personal reform or change, describing it as, "relinquishing an old self and inventing a new one" (p.120). His premise is that change occurs slowly and over a long period of time.

Throughout the literature the predominance of defining and developing theories regarding desistance tends to point toward perceiving desistance as a process as opposed to a discrete state (Kazemian, 2007). Criminology studies report that offenders may have intermittent periods

when they commit many criminal acts, other periods with relatively few crimes, and periods when no criminal activities occur. It is not likely that a criminal career will abruptly cease; it seems, therefore, that desistance is indeed a process.

An important factor in whether criminals reoffend is simply the process of getting older, growing up. A number of researchers cite age and maturation as central to desistance from crime (Giordano, 2002). Shapland (2011) comments, "persistent offenders often sharply decrease their levels of offending during the decade between the ages of 20 and 30" p. 256. A study by Laub and Sampson (2003) supports the finding that criminal behavior in young men decreases considerably over time or stops entirely.

The State of the Literature and the Need for This Study

The literature described above is valuable, but much of it is limited to the points of view and theories from the perspective of the researcher and, often, in my opinion, to the exclusion of the ex-offender. As noted previously in this research, the consistent omission of the factor of race in studies is evidence of a significant gap and flaw in the research. Still, as in any field of inquiry, the state of the art can be pushed further. The studies almost all examine the external factors that impact reentry. I am interested in exploring the process of individual change that is ultimately the deciding factor in reintegration and desistence

The Bureau of Justice Statistics Report 2010 indicates that 708,677 prisoners were released back into communities in 2010 (Guerino et al., 2011). Since approximately 40.2 % of the U.S. prison population is African American, and about 41 % are Latino, it is reasonable to expect that a significant number of prisoners released are minority. It is, therefore, critical for the viability and meaningfulness of research that studies address the specific social institutions and constructs pertinent to desistance from crime for minorities.

Families and communities that include large numbers of released offenders are subject to declines in social and cultural values and lost opportunities to establish and maintain relationships as a result of the incarceration of both women and men. African American communities particularly bear the burden of decline and dysfunction because of the disproportionate number of offenders returning to these communities. This is a compelling reason to expand research efforts to focus on minorities. Theorists and practitioners agree that learning more about the onset and the persistence of crime will lead to a better understanding of how to assist in the process of desistance (Byre & Trew, 2008; Goodstein, 1979; Sampson & Laub, 2003; Travis, 2001) and, thereby, benefit children, families, and communities as well as the social constructs impacted by incarceration, release, and re-offending (Foster, 2001; Thompson, 2008).

Besides being flawed by the omission of the factor of race, the existing research seems inadequate because it looks only at external factors like age, housing, employment, availability of social services, and the like. There is no question that those are important factors, but ultimately the transition to sustained desistance (more than three years) depends on the choices of the individuals involved. Many researchers have acknowledged that desistance is a process rather than a sudden event, but there is very little in the literature about what that process might be and at what point conclusions regarding desistance can be drawn (Bushway et al., 2001; Maruna, 2009, 2011) It seems obvious that the next step is to examine the nature of that process from the inside, from the viewpoint and experience of the ex-offenders themselves.

In an effort to achieve and maintain a civilized society, something must be done to assist offenders in transitioning from the anti-social behaviors of criminology to behaviors void of criminal acts. This is a fundamentally important reason to study desistance and to develop and

test theories and approaches to establish what works and what does not. True to the tenets of research, the process of reaching a factual basis for a defendable theory comes with time and study in order to explore a relevant hypothesis.

Analysis of Literature

In an effort to determine what studies are available that include ex-offenders' voices and the stories of their journeys from criminal behavior to living a life without committing crime, I found only a few that focus to some extent on these topics and a limited number that specifically include the voice and the process.

A study by Bahr, Armstrong, Gibbs, Harris, & Fisher (2005) examined reentry using qualitative and quantitative data to explore the reentry process from the perspective of the parolees. Fifty-one parolees from Salt Lake City and Provo, Utah, were interviewed over the first three months of their release from prison and then tracked for a six-month period to determine how they adapted to reentry. The researchers' theoretical approach was based on the key ideas in the Laub and Sampson (1998) study which focused on life course perspectives, social controls, and the theory that social bonds, e.g., living with a spouse or having a job would provide greater constraints to criminal behavior than if those bonds were not present in the parolee's life. The researchers interviewed the 51 parolees shortly after their release, posing 129 quantitative and qualitative questions in the first interview. There was a second interview one month after the first interview and then another three months after the first interview. The second and third interviews consisted of 79 questions.

The study also included interviews with the parole officers to whom the parolees reported during the study, and all interviews were held at the adult probation and parole office. Forty-three of the 51 parolees were men, and 38 identified their ethnicity as white.

> The sample is described as a nonrandom sample that is not designed to represent parolees in Utah or the United States, Nevertheless, in terms of ethnic status, our sample is similar to the parole population in Utah...Our sample is much lower in the proportion of African Americans than are parolees in the U.S. as a whole, reflecting the small proportion of African Americans in Utah (Laub & Sampson, 1998, p. 250).

African Americans were insignificant in this study because of their relatively low percentage in the Utah population; the study period was too short to determine a process of desistance by any of the participants and the researchers did not discuss reentry success.

A study by Cid and Marti (2012) took place in Barcelona, Spain. The study participants were identified as either Spanish or foreigner and categorized as young offenders, young-adult offenders, adult (drug abusing) offenders, and last onset offenders.

The intent of the study by Cid and Marti (2012) was to determine whether prisoners' self-assessment of expected behaviors upon release could be interpreted as narratives of desistance or narratives of persistence. Researchers conducted narrative interviews with prisoners whose expected release date was within three months. The research questions were structured to determine whether the prisoners' perceptions of personal relationships, education, training, drug treatment, or other positive experiences during their prison term might foster narratives that speak of desisting from crime or whether, based on perceived negative experiences during their prison term, would the prisoners' narratives speak of persisting in the criminal behavior upon release.

The study sought answers to two questions in the narrative interview process. First, using Maruna's theory (2009) that an offender must first make a conscious choice, otherwise known as cognitive transformation, to change from offending to a conventional life, what was the prisoners' narrative about their choices. Second, the person must demonstrate self-efficacy—

"the perceived ability to overcome the circumstances that explained past offending behavior and to carry out the requirement of conventional life (Bandura, 1977)" (Maruna, 2009).

The research questions were structured to elicit whether the prisoners' perceptions of personal relationships, education, training, drug treatment or other positive experiences during their prison term, foster narratives that speak of desisting from crime; or, based on perceived negative experiences during their prison term, did the narratives of prisoners speak of persisting in the criminal behavior upon release?

According to the researchers the most significant limitations of the study were that this was a study of narratives of desistance rather than about desistance (Bandura, 1977). Further, they concluded that there was no evidence in the research that could claim that the narratives about desistance expressed at the end of the prisoner's sentence would actually result in future desistance.

The research may have some value in determining how narratives are crafted and what variables, i.e., environment, health, and other social bonds and institutions, might influence change in the individual's story; however, it did not fill the gap in the body of narrative research of voices of African American men and their turning point from criminality to desistance.

Readiness is a critical element in the design and delivery of programs to achieve change from criminal behavior and efforts towards desistance. Anstiss, Polaschek, & Wilson (2011) discusses a motivational interviewing intervention (MI) that measures prisoners' readiness to change from criminal behaviors offered to some prisoners and not to others. The New Zealand prison is a one-system prison where all prisoners who are sentenced to periods longer than six months are assessed and referred to prison-based rehabilitation programs.

The initial group participants in the above study (Antiss, 2011) were referred by the prison sentence planners. The participants were then matched with men for whom Motivational Interviewing was not available. The hypotheses was an attempt to try different methods of measurement or combinations, (the Trans-theoretical Model of Change and Motivational Interviewing) of tests to determine how and if the approaches might work with larger groups, i.e. if reductions in recidivism could be effectuated for larger groups using the same testing and evaluation methods.

The participants were referred by the assessors at the prison who drew them from a group of prisoners who met the criteria for the study. The matched group was drawn from an electronic database of all current male prisoners starting a sentence of more than six months, the same as the referred group, and was found to have no significant differences with the referred group. However, the researchers indicate throughout the document that the objectives of the research were not met. The results show that it was not possible to fully examine the issue of whether prisoners who went on to a criminogenic programme after MI Intervention had better outcomes than those who were exposed to the MI Intervention alone, a criminogenic programme alone or no intervention.

Summary

Decades of get tough on crime, including the Rockefeller Drug laws, three strike laws, and the change to determinate sentencing led to sentencing and corrections policies supporting harsher and longer prison sentences. The resulting prison overcrowding, unprecedented building of prisons to accommodate more prisoners, and the eventual release of prisoners back to their communities has forced the government authorities, social services, and penal systems to pay attention to the economic, social, and political impacts of returning prisoners.

Researchers have studied reentry and reintegration and advanced ideas and suggested strategies and practices to assist in successful reentry of the offender while also considering ways to protect the public from prisoners who, according to statistics, are likely to reoffend.

While public officials, legislators, and advocates for prison reform state the goal of reentry is for the offender to successfully reintegrate into society and desist from crime, the fact is that none of the corrections, judicial, or social systems adequately support that goal. Researchers, theorists, and practitioners have not yet found strategies, programs, or practices that work to begin and sustain the process of desistance that can be generalized to the offender population.

My research *Voices* contributes to the body of work concentrated on African American men about whom little research has been conducted regarding successful desistance. The qualitative research methodology of narrative inquiry is used to interview and record the personal stories of African American men who have served prison terms, reentered, and reintegrated into their community and succeeded in desistance from criminal activity and re-incarceration in spite of the many freedom-threatening obstacles.

Chapter III: Method: Narrative Inquiry

Introduction

Life Stories

Life is a song worth singing
a prayer worth speaking ever so surely
not pleading but thanking, rejoicing

Life is a cry worth crying
when fresh from the tears
emerges a new you
born of the revelations
pushed up from your spirit
through the tears that
flow freely and allow the same freedom for you

Life is a question, questioned
and an answer, answered
deeper and deeper
with greater knowing and clearness
each time you question
and the soul speaks its answer

Life is a breath worth taking
an exhale seeking
give and take

Life is a call to the awakened Spirit:
teach me, open the inward door
and out pour the hidden stories

Life is a story worth telling

Listen. Just listen
Hear me.
See me heal.

During my years of study in the PhD in Leadership and Change program at Antioch University there were many fascinating theories and research methodologies presented for review, investigation, practice, and use in developing the required individual learning achievements. Coming into the PhD program with vested experience as a community activist and practitioner, it was natural for me to be drawn to the qualitative research methods, i.e. case studies, phenomenology, action research, ethnography. These qualitative methods are avenues for me to tell the stories of the lives and situations lived by people for whom I advocate fairness and justice and also as a means to use scholarly research to direct the attention of government and community leaders, scholars, and practitioners to the plight of ex-offenders seeking redemption from their past. These methods are so alive to me as opposed to quantitative methods steeped in scientific evidentiary-based principles producing data and numbers and analyses to prove a theory, or not. Qualitative research involves people and action, even if it is only through observation. It is as an exchange and a change, as in my poem at the beginning of this chapter, whether visually perceived or not. It is humanistic. I enjoy the personal and direct involvement that is associated with qualitative research methodologies. I feel more connected with the work, and, most likely, because of my practitioner history, I feel a greater sense of gaining meaning and progress toward accomplishment.

The prison population is a sensitive group in which individuals are protected by strictly defined and monitored procedures through universities and government funded programs. Most of the quantitative data, analyses, and reports are generated from counts of individuals: number of persons arrested, number of inmates by gender, number of inmates by age, and so on. A different set of rules applies when interviewing and/or observing and collecting information from or about persons with criminal histories, particularly those who are incarcerated or still in the

penal system, either by parole or probation. One must adhere to the research policies of protection, privacy, confidentiality, disclosure, and the right to refrain from or opt out of participation.

While the preparation and conduction of research with this group is more challenging than simply collecting and comparing data as in much of quantitative research, the process is much more rewarding and exciting for me. In qualitative research I can sense and view the intangibles that have relevance to the text of the conversation. I will not be restricted to an inflexible manner of data gathering, using a set of unalterable questions to test for specific outcomes.

One of my first research papers was a 2008 case study*, What Makes Some Black Boys Bad Boys: A Case Study of Melanie B. Burris.* Melanie Burris was a criminal. He lived a lifestyle of affluence supported by illegal activities involving women and drugs. He was convicted to a 10-year term for murder and assault to commit murder and served his time in San Quentin Prison in California. Upon his release he returned to his familiar habit of criminal behavior, and after only one year on the streets, he was arrested and convicted of a new crime. He served a second 10-year sentence in San Quentin Prison. M. Burris was released in 1972, and upon his return home he vowed he would never go back to prison. He has remained free to this day.

Melanie was sentenced for his crime during the era of indeterminate sentencing, which is a penal sentencing structure that provides a sentencing range of incarceration for applicable convictions, e.g. the judge could decree a sentence of 5 to 15 years, meaning a minimum of 5 years and likely no more than 15 for the criminal offense for which he was convicted. The prisoner could be released at any time during that period. He might serve only 5 years if he

received credit for good behavior, taking up a trade or some other favorable choice, or he could be held until the total 15 years were served. With tougher laws and longer sentences encouraged by the tough on crime platforms that many politicians advocated in the 80s and the following decades, the prisons were filling faster, and inmates were being held to the end of the range rather than being released at their minimum time served. Melanie was imprisoned for two separate 10-year sentences before the age of 50. He was last released in 1984. If he had been convicted of another crime after his last release from prison, it is likely he would still be incarcerated because the three strikes law enacted in California in 1994 would have mandated a sentence of life in prison. The subject of my case study and the research question was, "What made Melanie Baptiste Burris so bad?" I was fascinated and disturbed by his story of bad behavior as an adolescent and his increasingly violent behavior and criminal acts as he became an adult. And, I was equally fascinated by his ability to stop being bad.

A quote from Max van Manen aptly reflects Melanie's story: "The narrative power of story is that sometimes it can be more compelling, more moving, more physically and emotionally stirring than lived-life itself." (1990, p. 129). In Melanie's words:

> I knew I could not do any more time in prison. I could not go back to San Quentin. I escaped the gas chamber by a miracle and I know God spared me because he had something for me to do. I talk to these guys and women out here now and try to tell them to straighten up their lives. Sometimes, I'll cook dinner and feed them just so I can talk to them, try to help 'cause the prisons now ain't no joke." (M. Burris, 2007, case study participant, as told to N. Nightingale)

Considering the literature that exists regarding barriers to reentry and high recidivism rates, particularly among African Americans and people of color, there is relatively little research exploring and discussing successful reentry. How did Melanie Burris and the few like him change from a life of crime to a life free of criminal behavior? That is the question. The question has been studied by advanced academics, seasoned scholars, and experienced criminologists.

I first embraced phenomenology at a lecture at Antioch University where the methodology was introduced. The theory and practice of phenomenology resonated with me as an enticing way to research, learn, and write about the question of successful desistance. The process of seeking the answers, the quest of the inquiry through individuals who have lived criminal lives and who are successfully living and sustaining a life of desistance intrigues me. I believe this research may ultimately provide an opportunity for the participant and the researcher to present those lived experiences to a community of individuals with similar backgrounds. Such stories may influence life changes from criminal behavior to desistance for others. For this effort, narrative inquiry, a phenomenological approach, is a fitting framework.

Why I Chose Narrative Inquiry

I have chosen narrative inquiry as the methodology of choice for my dissertation. because the various methods available, including interviews, surveys, dialogue between participant and researcher, storytelling, and interpretation of story give me the necessary tools for the in-depth exploration of the questions and the encouragement of self-expression from individuals I will interview. The individuals who are living the life and sharing the experiences through story provide an opportunity for the researcher-practitioner, in concert with the participant/story teller, to identify and recognize a community of reformed offenders who give voice to personal transitions from criminal behavior and remain apart from recidivists by sustaining desistance from crime.

Voice is meaning that resides in the individual and enables that individual to participate in a community. The struggle for voice begins when a person attempts to communicate meaning to someone else. Finding the words, speaking for oneself, and feeling heard by others are all a part of this process. Voice suggests relationships: the individual's relationship to the meaning of

her/his experience and, hence, to language, and the individual's relationship to the other, since understanding is a social process (Britzman as cited in Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4).

To delve into the research question of what causes the personal transition from criminal behavior to desistance for African American men who have experienced multiple incarcerations, I encouraged the ex-felon to open his heart and soul and dig to the bottom of his being to answer the question for me—and very likely for himself, as well.

> In qualitative research the nature of "voice", what it represents, who it represents, and who has the power to assert it remains a topic of rigorous intellectual exchange. The ability to provide multiple opportunities for "voice" in privileged settings, without marginalizing a group or an individual, is a concern of qualitative researchers from various genres of research. Qualitative researchers use the tools of interviews, surveys, field observations, shadowing, and archival data in their efforts to uncover the complexities of voice that provide answers and sometimes questions for their research. (Chapman, 2005, p. 27)

In this study I interviewed the participant, recorded his words, engaged, listened, held the silence between the words, observed, heard the voice, and overlaid the body language (Bruner, 2002). Was that genuine? Is he relaxed and comfortable? Does he trust me (Seidman, 2006)? The interpretation of the stories was as critical as the story being told. And, it was critical that hermeneutic review, in the opinion of the participants, was a true reflection of their lived experiences.

To be successful in the narrative inquiry process, it was necessary to be a participant, as well—listening to the story teller, interacting, and interpreting, developing my voice as researcher to retell the story. Bruner writes that "to narrate" derives from both "telling" (narrare) and "knowing in some particular way" (gnarus)—the two tangles beyond sorting" (Bruner, 2002, p. 27).

Overview and Definition of Narrative Inquiry

Narrative is phenomenon and method (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative is story—individuals putting into words the thoughts and feeling of their life experiences and the researcher/writer linking the divide between the stories told and interpretation of meaning. There has been an increasing interest in narrative over the past 20 years, particularly in fields of study that embrace the importance of incorporating the thoughts and feelings of persons with whom the research is conducted. It is no longer acceptable to observe from a disconnected place while sitting in the midst of people observing and calculating, sketching and numbering, making notations sans the voice of the researched and the researcher. Sociologists, educators, scientists, psychologists, practitioners, and researchers, whether positivist or constructivist, have all discovered the value of employing narrative in their research studies.

The qualitative research approach of narrative inquiry allows the compounding of science and art. Assessments, clinical studies, criminal reports, and other data are combined with the phenomenon and literal heart of the matter as only the story teller can tell. The narrative inquiry methodology provides the means to understanding the lived experience of some African American men and their successful journey to desistance from crime.

So much has been written about the reasons former prisoners return to prison, including inability to find stable and life-sustaining employment, absence of family support, homelessness, lack of medical care, drug addiction, and the absence of treatment. Not much, however, is available regarding the personal decision to desist from criminal behavior and how desistance is achieved in spite of the challenges and barriers to reentry and reintegration. Where are their stories of overcoming, achieving, sustaining, and succeeding? Was there an awakening—an epiphany? Was there a point in time that can be defined, pinpointed, recalled? Change happens

within a person. I propose that changing from criminal behavior to desistance from crime and recidivism is a phenomenon that is best explained and understood by the stories narrated by the ones living the experience (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998; van Manen, 1990).

Narrative is a means of characterizing the phenomena of human experiences, and the form implies that something happened to particular subjects in a particular life world (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998). Narrative discourse describes the lives and conditions of humanity in a way that numbers alone cannot capture. The narrative approach helps tell the stories of people, societies, relationships, and interactions and "mediates between an inner world of thought-feeling and an outer world of observable actions and states of affairs" (Bruner, 2002). Social justice, advocacy, and participatory worldviews are often best conveyed through narrative techniques primarily because this form of expression is more useful in understanding complex issues, and seeking solutions and relief for the disenfranchised, marginalized and oppressed including the ex-offender population central to my dissertation question and study.

Lieblich,Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber (1998) present a formal definition of narrative research:

> Narrative research, according to our definition, refers to any study that uses or analyzes narrative materials. The data can be collected as a story (a life story provided in an interview or a literary work) or in a different manner (field notes of an anthropologist who writes up his or her observations as a narrative or in personal letters). It can be the object of the research or a means for the study of another question. It may be used for comparison among groups, to learn about a social phenomenon or historical period, or to explore a personality. (pp. 2-3)

Qualitative research has its roots in anthropology and sociology, but it expanded into other disciplines as it became clear that the number-based outcomes of quantitative research left meanings, feelings, and thoughts out of the equation. For an expanded viewpoint, Polkinghorne opines that narrative data collected from descriptive information of occurrences by an

interviewee is not necessarily story—"It is qualitative research and their data is narrative, but it is not storied"(Polkinghorne as cited in Clandinin, 2007). Polkinghorne further describes his position regarding narrative inquiry by defining its distinction from qualitative research:

> I think in qualitative research there is a general push to provide taxonomies and conceptual systems and so on which sort of look for commonalities across interviews and other things. And my own point there is, I think that narrative is quite different, that it really deals with individual live. (Polkinghome as cited in Clandinin, 2007, p. 632)

He makes the point that narrative inquiry is beyond the paradigm of qualitative research. It's not just about people and recapitulation of things that happen but narrative inquiry "describes changes through time experienced as it gets sedimented and affects other things" (p. 632).

Most significantly, narrative inquiry invites the reader into a story; the goal of narrative inquiry is not to isolate, reduce, or simplify but to elaborate complexities and relationships in the service of understanding human life. Narrative inquiry is hermeneutic in nature because it is contingent upon the perception and interpretation of the researcher. The writer/researcher selects aspects of a narrative to highlight elements of a research context in order to portray a holistic picture of research participants, issues, and settings (Kenny, 2005, p. 41).

Consistent with the place of hermeneutics stated by Kenny (2005), Bentz and Shapiro (1998) discuss sixteen turns in which they engaged in the writing of Mindful Inquiry, and among the turns they advise on the place of the researcher in the interpretation of words and text that they describe as Hermeneutic Turns (J Through L):

> J. Look at the elements of your texts as texts. Elucidate the levels of preexisting interpretations of the situations and their relevance.
> K. Allow the movements of understanding happen on their own time.
> L. Through presence and intention, allow for a release of new meaning to occur. Make a space, a clearing, for new "beings" to emerge (p. 51)

Given the opinions of the importance of interpretation and meaningfulness of story, the role of the researcher in the narrative inquiry process is critical to interpretation and understanding of the narrated story. The relationship between researcher and research is one built upon, not only one of trust, but also one in which the researcher has become immersed in knowledge about the subject of inquiry. It also brings into question the evaluation of narrative inquiry.

In its emerging state and varied uses and definitions, is there a standard or common guideline by which narrative inquiry is evaluated and accepted as legitimate research? Lieblich et al. (1998) offers one set of criteria by which narrative inquiry may be evaluated:

- width: the comprehensiveness of evidence,
- coherence: the way different parts of the interpretation create a complete and meaningful picture,
- insightfulness: the sense of innovation or originality in the presentation of the story and its analysis, and
- parsimony: the ability to provide an analysis based on a small number of concepts and elegance or aesthetic appeal.

Mishler (1990) offers a more simplistic evaluative process with only two criteria: trustworthiness and authenticity. He believes that rather than relying on formal rules and standardized procedures of evaluation, narrative inquiry research is validated by a community of researchers who evaluate the trustworthiness of a study through discourse, measuring it against their own work. Authenticity, according to Mishler, is evaluated similarly by community discourse with an outcome of common thinking and validation of a particular study.

The form of narrative inquiry has continued to evolve and expand into other fields of study, e.g., psychology, anthropology, law, sociology, education, gender studies, art therapies, and life sciences in general. Yet, narrative inquiry has not attained the recognition and acceptance by academia as scientific work. In an interview conducted by Clandinin (2007), Lieblich et al. (1998) explains that the separation of clinical psychology—the humanistic, whole person approach to studying human behavior—from mainstream psychology positioned clinical psychology as, perhaps, case study or stories, but not scientific work. In academia, the positivist world view remains the standard by which validity and value of research is measured and qualitative research methodologies, such as narrative inquiry, although gaining acceptance by its use, still has not attained an equal place of acceptance.

The attribute of narrative inquiry methodology favorable to my research practice is the ability to seek out the why and the how by examining unstructured information, such as interview transcripts, recordings, notes, and photographs. The fact that the methodology does not rely solely on statistics or numbers, which are the usual constructs of the domain of quantitative researchers, gives me literary freedom to write and interpret with the blurred distinction of hermeneutics inherent in the personal voice of lived experiences. Employing narrative inquiry and the associated interviewing techniques, I asked participants for the stories of change from the perspective of the reformed offender. The voice, the tone, the body language, the silence in between the words all are integral to the story telling, and I sensed keenly during the interviews and the story telling that it is from these places the stories emerged (van Manen, 1990). From the eyes, ears, and heart of my writer/researcher/activist position, I observed the storytellers and their characteristics. I listened, recorded and interpreted the stories of the men in the study who shared their turning points and how they succeeded in desistance. This to me is narrative inquiry.

There is not common agreement on the definition of narrative inquiry, even among researchers who assert themselves as narrative inquirers, except to agree that it is a qualitative methodology. Even so, proponents and researchers who ascribe to narrative inquiry as a valid and valued humanistic form of research accept it as essential to giving context and deeper understanding of real life experiences in a manner in which the positivist, objective methodologies cannot possibly do.

Historical Roots and Theoretical Premises

Television programs like Oprah Winfrey's Soul Sundays and the Life Course series, public television biographies, and documentaries have made life stories and narrations of historical events popular and readily accessible to a wide audience all around the world, but story telling is not new. "Narrative inquiry may be the oldest type of research. Stories were the way people shared information, compared aspects of their lives, and engaged in debates long before written texts were even imagined" (Kenny, 2005).

We need not go too far back in history to see the existence of storytelling and the influence of stories in the structure of lives and ways of being for entire populations and cultures. Tribal groups in Africa perpetuated and immortalized their traditions and cultural values through stories of their histories spoken through the voices of tribal elders and/or the designated and honored story teller of the tribe. Those stories embedded in the minds of captured Africans transported to the Americas as slaves were handed down through generations of ancestry. In 2007 on a trip to Senegal, West Africa, I was honored to sit with elders of a Fulani village who are the knowledge keepers of the tribes, and, thus, the story tellers of their history. In the United States African American storytellers adapt stories from descendants in many narrative forms,

including folktales, theatre arts, Negro spiritual, gospel, and contemporary songs. The same is true of other tribal groups, such as American Indians and Aborigines.

Going back two millennia, we find some of the first of literary narrative in our written history. Plato, a philosopher born in 427 B.C. produced the *Dialogues,* a compilation of stories. He founded the Academy in Athens, Greece, the first institution of higher learning in the Western world. The philosopher Aristotle, a student of Plato, committed to written form most of the narratives for which he became known. Among them was his first elaborated theory of narrative written in *Poetics.*

The contemporary use of narrative as an academic method is integral to the emergence of anthropology as a formal discipline. Franz Boas, the founder of modern anthropology, introduced rigorous scientific methodology that was patterned after research in the natural sciences. Later, other scholars, like Bronislaw Malinowski, Ruth Benedict, and Hamilton Cushing, pioneered cultural anthropology in the mid-20th century. They produced field notes from their observations of tribal societies that described settings, events, surroundings, and persons, thereby creating narratives that told the stories of the lives of the observed, including observation from their own perspectives. Malinowski was the first anthropologist to live within the culture he studied. From its beginnings in anthropological studies, the use of narrative inquiry spread into other fields and forms of research, including ethnography, sociology, psychology, and other social and natural science disciplines. It is clear that narrative inquiry has found a place in the world view of phenomenological research.

Methodology

African American Men Who Give Voice to the Personal Transition from Criminality to Desistance (Voices) utilized narrative inquiry research to interview and record the spoken

accounts of ex-offenders who were recruited through the snowballing method, i.e., participants recruiting other volunteer participants via word of mouth interest. Participants told their stories of criminal behaviors, overcoming social and economic barriers, and finally breaking the cycle of recidivism after multiple jail and prison terms. From their voices comes the story of change—the point at which each decided to turn away from criminal behavior to a life of desistence and freedom that had not been experienced, for some, for many years.

Narrative inquiry research involving storytelling and in-person interviews with ex-offenders is limited. Criminology has a long research history, particularly in quantitative studies; however, qualitatively studies have a much shorter history, and their scientific significance is still debated in academia. As phenomenological research narrative inquiry is an emerging research methodology. There appears to be a dearth in the narrative inquiry literature that specifically focuses on African American men and their trajectories away from criminality to desistance. My research study adds to the limited body of research, addressing, exclusively, the African American men who, because of racial discrimination and social determinants different from any other group, warrant studies directed towards understanding criminality within and by individuals in this specific group that happens to be arrested, sentenced, and incarcerated at rates higher than any other group. Continuing interest in desistance research, social justice advocacy for change in the corrections systems, and the active involvement of ex-offenders in change for themselves and misguided young men will, undoubtedly, lead to additional research and projects.

It is commonly accepted by theorists and practitioners who study criminology and/or work with offenders that eventually most prisoners will be released (Bushway et al., 2001; Foster, 2001; Peterisilia, 2004; Hipp et al., 2010; Thompson, 2008; Travis, 2000) and return to the communities where they lived before incarceration. The difficulties faced by released

prisoners in their attempts to reenter and reintegrate into mainstream society are many, including limited access to housing, difficulty in finding employment and obtaining health services, food, and family support. Each one of these challenges to reentry have been researched extensively, particularly over the past 20 years or more, as increasing prison populations signaled the inevitable public crises of thousands of prisoners returning home.

I located qualitative research in which interviews of ex-offenders revealed similar problems as those ex-offenders in my study, but the participants are not African American men, an important characteristic addressed in my research project. Some research focuses primarily on female offenders' reentry and desistance efforts (Leverentz, 2010, 2011) or does not specify the race, gender, or ethnicity of the research participants. Race specificity is important because according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (Carson & Sabol, 2011) African American men comprise a disproportionately large population in prisons (35%), and they are arrested at higher and more frequent rates than other group. The disproportionate rate of incarceration means that there is also a large number of released prisoners returning to urban communities that are underprepared to provide the resources that the released individuals need to sustain themselves and avoid rearrests and recidivism.

The dissertation *Recidivism and the investigation of prisoners who have successfully reentered American society* (Larkin, 2002) studied and documented successful reentry. The study is qualitative research, but it does not include stories and the participants are not identified as African American. It is an example that illustrates my position that available research that adds to the body of work regarding certain aspects of criminality is absent the story—the voices—of the participants which is what defines narrative inquiry.

The Larkin (2002) dissertation includes interviews of 13 ex-offenders who had been out of prison for at least five years. The participants held at least a bachelor's degree that was completed while still incarcerated. The researcher sought to determine if there are factors common to former prisoners who do not return to prison. The participants were sent four questions prior to the in-person interview with the researcher. Each also received a list of 26 terms and was asked to prioritize 10 of the terms, using relevance to recidivism as the basis. Interviews were conducted, and the data was analyzed to determine common factors. The participant responses were analyzed according to five factors, some of which were not supportive of non-recidivism;

1. education and training provided in prison would enable the former inmate to maintain living wage employment,
2. a less abrupt transition between prison and release (would assist in reentry),
3. treatment for chemical addictions (would assist in reentry),
4. constructive support in the prison and parole systems to support reentry, and
5. systemic social influences and institutions perpetuate the negative status quo of the criminal justice system.

The research concluded that the prison and social services systems did not make a significant contribution to successful efforts of non-recidivists. The research also did not adequately address the research objective of identifying, or not, common factors in the lives of individuals who do not return to prison after being released.

Many of the studies comport with the age-graded theory of informal social control (Laub & Sampson 2001; Sampson & Laub, 1993, 2003) and discuss jobs and employment,

specifically, as institutions that may engender positive change in behavior of offenders (Doherty & Ensminger, 2013; Laub, 1988; Warr, 1998).

Narrative Inquiry Research Project

The pilot research project conducted in the dissertation proposal was rich in participants' personal stories and revelations not only of lived experiences but also of the discovery, through introspection and the hearing of their own voices, of the worthiness of the person they have become in the afterlife of criminality and in the processes of desistance. Their stories and the researcher's reflections and interpretations and analyses are incorporated into the dissertation as important components of narrative inquiry. More importantly, the storytelling enriches the body of research specifically referencing African American men and their unique lived experiences as told by the individuals living the experience rather than a researcher who observed and wrote about the observation from his or her perspective.

The dissertation *African American Men Who Give Voice to the Personal Transition from Criminality to Desistance* centers on ex-offenders all of whom were raised in predominantly Black communities with similar family, social, and economic backgrounds. The youngest of the participants is 32, and the oldest is 75; each of the eight participants has served multiple jail and/or prison sentences.[2]

The Narrative Inquiry Research

Description of the research project, characteristics of participants sampled and criteria for inclusion/exclusion. Department of Justice statistics (Guerino et al., 2010) indicate that the average age for incarcerated males is 34 years. Released felons 30 years old and

[2] Jails are local city and/or county facilities where arrested persons are held until court and sentencing dates are determined and where, usually, short-term sentences are served. Prisons are penal institutions where usually convicted persons with longer term sentences, up to life imprisonment, are housed and where death penalty executions are carried out.

younger usually are re-incarcerated within six to nine months of their prison release and the likelihood of recidivism decreases markedly for an ex-felon who desists from crime for three years or more. Using this statistical profile for recidivism and the desistance threshold, African American male ex-offender volunteers who have served multiple terms in jails/prisons were recruited directly by me based on personal knowledge, by participant referral, or asked to be involved after hearing about the study. The group was assembled as follows.

- The ex-offender participants are from Venice and Santa Monica, CA, and one is from the Watts community in south-central Los Angeles. Each shares cultural, social, and historical affinities to their communities.
- Because it is still unknown what factors, including types of criminal offenses, have a bearing on desistance from recidivism, I did not restrict any criminal offense committed by anyone, but as it turned out, all participants have drug offense histories, which was the cause of their incarceration.
- Individual interviews and the focus group meetings were held in my home. I served food at the focus group meeting, and cordial conversations began easily as participants sat around the kitchen table. After brief introductions, discussions continued on the subjects of criminal histories, family, personal transformations, desistance, and interest in influencing change or avoidance of criminal behavior by youth in the community.

Narrative Inquiry Interviews

Two research methods were incorporated in the research project: focus groups and individual interviews.

Two focus groups, consisting of five to eight participants, were conducted. The consent form was read, and all participants were asked and did affirm their understanding of the interview purpose and process. In addition, all signed the consent form and noted that opting out of participation in the research at any point is acceptable without consequence**.** Participants were asked about re-entry experiences and the barriers encountered, the turning point from crime, the challenges to sustain desistance, and what their transformed lives are like today. Common among the dialogue from all participants were personal reflections about their parents, their family life, attitudes about incarcerations, and the changing times where they are now.

Each participant was interviewed. At the start of the interview, I engaged the participant in conversation in which we talked about the participant's offenses, how much time was served for each offense, the period of time between re-incarceration of each offense, how long it had been since the most recent release from prison, what was most beneficial in the reentry efforts and desistance attempts, and what help was needed but not received. The conversation was casual and unrushed so as not to appear prodding or demanding.

After receiving the signed consent forms and personal information for the research records that verifying that the participant meets the research group profile, the interviewee was asked to speak freely, in whatever detail and sequence he chose, to tell the story of his criminally lived experiences.

Participant Consent Form and Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval

The approved consent and IRB forms are included in Appendix A.

Leadership and Change Within the Ex-offender Participant Group

Dining room table discussions vibrated with energy from each participant as the familiar experiences coalesced into common subjects and concerns. As this group of men ages 32 - 75

talked about how they made it through the reentry barriers, Michael raised the concern about the young women in the community who were "tending down the wrong path right along with the guys." A.S., spoke to the concern, "These guys and girls think different and they have a different mind-set—harder to reach and don't have the respect for older guys even though you been in prison. Things have changed since y'all were in the streets—it's meaner."

From this provocative discussion emerged declarations of commitments to do what each felt capable of doing to influence youth to change their course in life from potential prisoner to a person knowing there are better choices that lead to prison-free lives. What a change for a group that had not thought of themselves as change agents.

I have not found literature discussing reformed offenders helping active offenders desist from their criminal behavior through the influence of their personal stories and commitments that arose from the self-reflection of the stories and the shared dialogue among their peers in the focus group. This outcome of the narrative inquiry research was unexpected, especially from one participant, given his story in the individual interview where he expressed doubt that he had anything to offer youth and wasn't interested in attempting to provide guidance.

The rich and evocative dialogue during individual interviews and two focus groups was captured in video and interview notes. Excerpts from interview transcriptions and the researcher's interpretation are included in Chapter IV. As is common in narrative inquiry storytelling, the stories do not follow a systematic linear sequence of time or action. In the course of freely speaking, the participants may have switched from one time period to another and from one subject to multiple subjects, from past to present and back to an experience that marked their turning point. As researcher, investigator, observer, instigator, listener, and participant, I sorted the linear discourses, the participants' sketches of the past haltingly uncovered and their

thoughtful reflections, indicating, perhaps, there were some things they were not ready to disclose or face and incorporated my interpretations of the stories in Chapter IV.

To this end the best description I have read of this aspect of the winnowing process is Judi Marshall's *Making Sense as a Personal Process* (1981). She acknowledges that what she can bring to the data is her sense of what is important as she reads the transcripts. She expresses confidence in being able to respond to meaningful chunks of transcript. She says that she recognizes them when she sees them and does not have to agonize over what level of semantic analysis she is doing. She affirms the role of her judgment in the process. In short, what is required in responding to interview text is no different from what is required in responding to other texts—a close reading plus judgment (Seidman, 2006, p, 117).

To this description I add the recognition of not only seeing meaningful chunks of transcript but also hearing meaningfulness as the stories are told.

Chapter IV: Discussion

Over 7 million people in the United States live with restrictions and mandatory supervision of probation or parole and suffer disenfranchisement from many rights and privileges that most people without criminal histories take for granted (The Sentencing Project, 2013). Loss of freedom to move about from city to city, or anywhere aside from his assigned area; loss of ability to control personal schedules because of the need to be available for the impromptu visits by the parole agent; loss of eligibility to vote (in some states, as in Kentucky, the loss is for a life time); and the loss of privacy, especially if one is ordered to take drug tests as a condition of parole.

Ex-offenders shared their post imprisonment lived experiences via interviews and storytelling during the exploration of narrative inquiry as the preferred research methodology for understanding the life and experiences of felons released from prison and their turning point to desistance from criminal behavior. Their stories were rich with personal phenomenon and introspection that opened the door to specific insights of ex-felons and, not only their trials and failures that are often referenced by criminologists, social workers, and theorists, but also the deep personal affectations of their struggles that could only be expressed in an open dialogue of lived experiences as told by them.

From the Dissertation Proposal, I made use of narrative inquiry methodology to capture the lived experiences of participants as they spoke their stories in the individual interviews and in the focus groups. The stories and the methodology are important contributions to the social justice research community because narrative inquiry methodology is an emerging methodology in the social sciences and because lived experiences, specifically of African American men, told

by themselves about the criminality of their lives, is very limited. This research project adds to the body of research in this genre.

The research chronicles the personal stories of ex-offenders who eventually experience a turning point in their lives that gives them the direction and resolve to change their behavior, break the cycle of recidivism, and desist from criminal activity. It is important work not only because of its specificity to African American men but also because it may have transferable value and relativity to other ex-felons, particularly African Americans who may benefit from relatable evidence of success and consistency in desistance efforts.

Chapter IV depicts the narrative storytelling and literary voices of African American ex-felons. To illustrate to the reader narrative inquiry as a research methodology, the life stories of Tony and A.S. are written in their entirety. Each of them speaks their lived experience, providing a narrative view of the phenomena of lived experience through storytelling and giving full opportunity to understand narrative inquiry as a way of understanding lived experience from the two-sided looking glass of the storyteller and of the researcher. The advantage of reading the full story of two different people is to get greater insight and understanding of the narrative inquiry approach and methodology with different voices from the storyteller and interpretation from the researcher. For the stories of the lived experiences of the other participants, I have selected sections of the stories relative to the common themes and topics significant to the study's posed research question. In all cases the language, grammar, opinions, views, and occasional crudeness, what some might consider inappropriate, is left intact.

Names of other people who are not participants in the study that are mentioned by the participants are written but are indicated by a long dash (----------).

My Life Story: The Long Way to Finding Myself as Told by Tony

DissClip 4.01 Intro to Tony's Story

Tony's background. Tony is a 64-year old African American male who was born and raised in Santa Monica, CA. He was an only child, raised by his mother. He was arrested multiple times and was incarcerated six times in state prisons before experiencing the epiphany that turned his life around.

In the 1950s the economic base of the city of Santa Monica, CA was largely middle to upper class. African Americans began to settle in Santa Monica in the early 1900s, and in 1920, according to the *Southern California Quarterly*, with a relatively small population of African Americans and Hispanics who were segregated by geographical boundaries from 22nd Street on the east and 4th Street on the west, Pico Boulevard on the south, and Broadway on the north: an area approximately five square miles.

There were only two public junior high schools and one public high school in Santa Monica, CA. The integration and diversity that was non-existent in the residential and commercial communities of the city occurred by default in the school system. Although the elementary schools were segregated by virtue of their locations where Blacks and Mexicans were not allowed to live, the junior highs and high school were the only public school choices, therefore creating an environment where different races, cultures, ethnicities, religions, and economic levels came together in the same space.

Knowing the history of Tony's background and upbringing in the Santa Monica, CA community adds narrative vision and environmental interrelatedness that may sharpen the reader's insight to his story. His is a story that was fluidly told with depth and detail as he crisscrossed through his life of crime, incarceration, regret, epiphany, personal transition, desistance, temptation to revert and, as of the interview, transformation and 15 years of desistance.

In keeping with the ethics of research, I disclose that I have known Tony for more than 40 years, not closely, but of him, because we both grew up in Santa Monica, CA and attended the same high school. As with most every African American families in Santa Monica, our families knew one another. He is younger than I, and we did not travel the same social circles although we have mutual acquaintances and friends.

I knew him after his storytelling in ways I would never have otherwise known him. Of course, he has reviewed and approved the story that is presented in this document, and I have excluded names or identifying references to other persons mentioned in his story.

Nearly all of his story regarding his criminal life was news to me. I was careful to listen, hear, observe, not presume or assume any understanding, and to avoid interruption except to ask a guiding question or to seek clarification (Seidman, 2006).

I present it here much in the manner he told it to me. Minor changes in syntax and grammar were made for readability and comprehension; otherwise, I applied no logic or justification for what is stated. Throughout the transcription, I make parenthetical notations to convey voiceless expressions and emphases, e.g., hand gestures, facial expressions, body positioning, etc. that Tony displayed in the telling of his story. The halting verbiage, the hanging thoughts, the crude street vernacular common to his criminal lifestyle, the raw truth and

reflective moments of perceived despondency, the language of desistance, and admitted temptation to digress from desistance are put to paper as authentically as I am able to interpret, as well as sage advice to wayward youth who would do well to listen to someone who has traveled the road from criminal behavior to prison and back again and knows the trials and hardships of trying to get back to mainstream society.

This is Tony's story.

N: What can you share with me about yourself and your criminal history?

T: *My criminal history is quite extensive because this being 2012, it goes all the way back to 1964, a little before that. But it's been quite extensive. Fifty years of criminality, so I'm quite an experienced and educated criminal.*

N: How old are you?

T: *Sixty-four*.

N: So you are 64 and your life includes about 50 years of criminal offenses?

T: Yeah.

N: How many times did you go to prison?

T: About six times.

N: What were the terms? How long did you stay in each time?

T: When I first started, I went to CDCR. I had to do my time in jail before that. But the first prison thing was CDCR. I ended up staying there like eight months, and it was more or less like being on the street.

N: What's CRC?

T: California Rehabilitation Center Program. And everybody that you ever did know was in there, down in Santa Monica. And it was like a big party. It was like being on the street. The

same things you did out here you were doing in there. So it was really no incentive to change because it was the same— environment. I got out, I got violated, I went back. And this was like eight months later. I did like six months. I got out. And then I did 18 months - went back for 18 months.

N: Where did you go—what prison?

T: CRC—back to CRC. They told me if I came back, they were going to lock me up and throw the key away because of my background. By then I had become what you would call a top ten criminal in the southern California area. I was classified as one of the top ten burglars in the State of California, the southern California area.

N: Was that your only offense?

T: I was a cat burglar. I went into people's homes while they were asleep. That's what I did and became quite successful at it as a criminal. But that only lasts for a minute. My thing is, the reason I was caught up in it is because I started out not really having a father. But my mother was trying to do the best she could. He was MIA - missing in action most of the time. It got to a point where we had more and more needs, and by me going to Santa Monica [High School], everybody dressed a certain way. I felt like I wanted to change when I was about in my freshman year and she couldn't afford to keep up. So she told me she couldn't buy something, and then that crossed me over. I didn't know that would have a profound effect on the rest of my life.

N: What crossed you over; that your mom couldn't afford to buy you something that you wanted?

T: Yeah. She was doing the best she could but she would only buy me the best, okay? I wanted a lot of cheap stuff. She would buy me stuff that would last. If she was going to spend her money on it, then it was going to last. Some of that stuff I didn't like.

N: You wanted the fad. You wanted what the other kids were wearing?

Tony: Yeah. And it was cheap, and she didn't want to buy it. I knew some people that were in some criminal activity, so I decided to go that way. Especially after my baseball career went down the tubes, you know. I was being scouted for professional baseball while I was in Santa Monica. And I got into it with the coach who I didn't know was a racist, and I got thrown out of school. He swung at me trying to hit me. But he told them I had threatened him and all of this, which I didn't. I just told them that they should be glad that he didn't hit me.

N: What grade were you in?

T: 11th grade

N: Your baseball opportunity fell through so what did you do then?

Tony: Yeah. I hooked up with some chicks that, you know, and started learning some things about burglaries. And then later on in life I started [doing other things]. I was into forgery and everything else, you know, ID theft. This was way back in the 60's and 70's when I did that.

N: Did you go to prison for that?

T: No, they couldn't get me for that. All they wanted to do was get me for the burglaries or receiving stolen property. I had other people working for me doing the ID theft. It was quite lucrative. It was very lucrative. But you want to get into my criminality.

N: You said you went to prison about six times and you started telling me about your incarceration two separate times at CRC; you had at least four more incarcerations, right?

T: Yeah. And each time, okay, it got steeper and steeper. It gets to a point where you feel like, and I'll put it to you like this, like a black curse, as a man there's so much that you grow up with. But there's a mentality in the Black neighborhood that kind of suppresses you. It doesn't support promotion up out of what you're in. You become a product of your environment. You become

stuck. You learn to exist in that particular environment and enjoy what you're doing. And if you become a success in that environment, then you've got kudos. That's where your respect is, and you don't try to rise no higher. You don't look outside of that. You're only content for right now and the gratification. So you've got to gratify yourself with what you know to do. So you become what you know to do. And you don't try to change to learn anything. So as a consequence, you become stuck in hopelessness. You know, you become stuck in hopelessness. And so you operate in this particular environment. So when you go to the pen, go to the penitentiary, you still operate in that environment because the way it's structured now you have to be in a car. In other words, a car is when you go in there, you have to know somebody.

N: Do you mean you have to know someone in the prison?

T: Oh, you've got to be a part of something. And it's divided up. CRC was north, south, Mexican, Mexican mafia, familia, all that, border brothers it's called. So it's divided up like that. And if you don't become a part of something, then you're a sitting duck. So you will always know some homeboys or some of the employees in the pen. So it's still the same. Whether you're getting the drugs in and you help to sling - the homies to sling or whatever - it's still you're operating with the same mindset.

N: So things don't change when you go to prison in terms of your criminal environment?

T: No. They don't give you anything to make you change. They talk about rehabilitation but it's not. I mean they give you a little work or your little whatever you're going to do for your canteen money. You're going to make 12 cents an hour or whatever. You know what I'm saying? But there's no, you can go to school. Basically you're still a product of your environment.

N: Tell me about Santa Monica and growing up there -- you said that in your environment you became known for a certain thing, and you kind of made that your badge that you wore, so to speak…

T: Santa Monica, I wouldn't trade that experience for nothing in the world. And I talk to people about it because the mere fact that in Santa Monica and Venice we grew up integrated, I found it's a plus. It's a plus. You learn how to move through different races and respect different races and different people's cultures. And it's a plus. So it allows you to move a lot more freely and a lot more easier and have a lot more knowledge than you would normally have if you were raised asleep—not knowing all these things like in some other particular black areas. Yeah, we learned how to dress. And you know, we had a social club and stuff like that. So in Santa Monica we were known to be able to dress.

And you had to learn how to talk. So my thing was I studied the dictionary a lot. But then I got too far out there, you know. In prison you know we're being watched or something—you can't be too educated. They think you act uppity—"Listen how this nigger talk. You got green eyes too, you black?"[3] *So then you done had it. So I had to change my vernacular, you know. So I had to become more ghetto and just talk black instead of just being proper. Because we were raised mostly proper in Santa Monica. Your parents tried to make you be the best you could possibly be. So our thing was dressing. So we had a reputation for being dressed. You know, just my whole clique.*

Then it went to selling drugs. My clique, we would, me and my partners, we would steal money to buy drugs. And not necessarily make no money off of drugs because we was making so

[3] Tony is African American, fair-skinned, and has green eyes. Cultural stigmas about light-skinned and dark-skinned people stemming from slavery and the preferential regard of lighter skinned slaves still exists among some African Americans.

much money doing burn. I mean it was just a badge of honor to be out there and be noted by the street people. You know what I'm saying. Everybody knew you. Street life. It's just like the street life. Everybody seeing who you are. You know what I'm saying? But everybody who knew you had a certain amount of respect because you moved in that circle. And everybody knew who you were.

NN: What was the last term that you served and where did you serve that time?

T: Ironwood. I was facing 50 to life. And it was strange how I got it broke down, but I'll get with you on that later. I served, I don't know, five and a half or five years; or was it five years and seven months' sentence (shrugs his shoulders; he's not sure). And I ended up serving four years, eight and a half months on that sentence. That kind of did it to me. I was on a shoot to kill yard. And a shoot to kill yard is they have painted signs on the walls that read no warning shots. So when they shoot, they shoot to kill. So I was on a level one-two yard.

N: What does that mean?

T: That means they give you different classifications. There were three, fours you know, and stuff like that. The higher you go, the worse it is. At first I was on a level three yard -that was cell living. You get down to a level one and two, that's dorm living. You have a lot more freedom. Four, you're totally locked down for a while. But I started out on a shoot to kill yard. And then as my points went down, I went to a level one and two yard.

The experience what happened with me at this particular time, I had what you would call I guess it was a spiritual awakening. I'm sitting on a urinal one day, and it's my birthday. And we're getting ready to get down with these Mexicans. The stupidest brother had started some stuff with Mexicans and they were going to move on us.

You know, this was the word. And I'm sitting, and I'm looking, and it dawned on me, a voice said, "Man, you're 50 years old." And I said, "What?" And I looked at this, (the thought) and I said, "50 years?" What the hell had happened? You know, I 'm sitting, I'm working out. I'm doing pull-ups and stuff. I'm sitting down on the bench. Going through these motions and in my head- my ass is, 50? I'm 50? How in the hell did I get 50? I was in a moment of disbelieving. I mean, I knew how old I was, but the significance of it, you know? Here I am 50 years old. There's a 19-year-old that has started some mess. And it just was I felt like saying, I can't do this no more. Do I want to stay here the rest of my life, you know, whatever life I have left? But the thing about it is the realization that I was 50, and I was sitting in here and haven't even started no life. It hit me. I mean it hit me hard. I mean I really cried. It hit me so hard, I was in disbelief. Where did the years go? In other words, I've been living in a fog by being high all the time and just living in my environment I had created. I was the god of my own little old world. And I couldn't see out of there. Now all of a sudden it hit me you're an old man. You can't grow old on the street or in prison.

You become a victim, so it was with me. I sat there and I said. "Oh, man." And so after praying on everything and thinking about it, I was thinking people do retire from jobs. How come I can't retire from this? And I don't want to come back. I don't never want to come back. So the only thing I think it was, was the change. It changed everything. Not just me but going back to where I was, I cannot go back. I can't step back into that same thing and become the same thing. So I prayed on it real hard. And the main thing I was praying about, you know, the Bible says therefore thinking that we have a Lord, you know, old things pass away and behold all things become new. And that was my prayer to Him every day: Change me. Make me new. I don't want nothing that I had. I don't want to be what I was because that's the only way I can

have success, you know, is to step into something that's going to keep me out of the loop until I'm transformed. And you know, I prayed a few other things. All things will be different now with the Lord. And that was my prayer every day, all day long. And lo and behold, that's what happened. I had to go to a halfway house (when released from prison).

N: Did you study the Bible when you were in prison?

T: Oh yeah. I did bible studies and stuff like that. My whole conversion was Spirit from the beginning to the end. I told you I was facing 50 to life. I had two cases. I had one out of Santa Monica, which was a three-strike case, 25 to life. I bailed out. Then I'm down here on Sixth and Broadway (in Venice, CA). I get busted again. That was automatically 25 to life. So put them both together, that's 50 to life.

N: What were you arrested for?

T: Possession.

N: Drugs?

T: Yeah, both times. So I was facing 50 plus the drugs plus any other priors, so it may have been more than 55 to life. It was literally really a 60 to life or something like that. So I'm in jail. So they put the cases together. One was in Santa Monica and one was in Venice; they decided to bring them both together. And the lady that took them, she said. "Well, I can't fight this." I said, "What!"

N: Who was the lady, a public defender?

T: Yeah. She said what happened was I had got busted when they passed the three strikes law. I was facing 75 to life out of Santa Monica. I totally beat the case. So they got mad at me. They had been wanting to kill me, the law was anyway, so it was time for me to change.

N: Do you mean the police wanted to kill you? Why?

T: Yeah. I was on the hit list.

N: In Santa Monica?

T: Yeah, but out of L.A. too. They had been looking for me. I got busted on an accident. They had flyers out for me. I wasn't supposed to be arrested. They told me that I wasn't supposed to be arrested. They said you're supposed to be shot.

N: Tell me about the flyers you mentioned. It sound as if they were a kind of wanted poster. What were they about?

T: Yeah. I was on a list. As a matter of fact, (name withheld) was on that list. That's what happened to him. It was just me and him, the only two blacks. So we weren't supposed to be arrested. We were supposed to be shot. And they straight told me, "Yeah, you're supposed to be shot. We've been looking for you for over a year." And it's all because I got into a fight with a Santa Monica police officer. He was trying to shoot me in the head and I beat him up. So that's what first started my things up. They wanted me to do life in a penitentiary. So, but anyway, moving on, it was quite extensive. So like I said, I was a product of my environment. Sitting there in the prison I started thinking and praying it was time for me to change.

So like I said, I prayed. And then things started happening when I got out. I was married and all of that. I went back to that, which I really didn't want to because I already knew what that situation was—but just to see what it was. And, it wasn't what I thought it was. But fortunate for me, I'm a vet.

N: Tell me more about being a veteran.

T: Yeah, I'm a veteran. And they have a home in Inglewood, CA. And I went to that home in Inglewood. And that kind of gave me a place to stay. Instead of coming back to my environment,

it gave me a place where I was kind of safe. I could come to there—fine. But not to stay a part of it; just as a pass through.

N: So how important to you was having a safe place to stay?

T: Very important because it gave me that space to decide and really see what I needed instead of trying to just jump back into my environment. So it was the same hopelessness, the same mindset, and it's you know, I'm Black. I've got a felony record. I can't do nothing!

But you know where I was it was like, hey, you know what, I can do anything that God wills me to do. Why keep telling myself I can't do? If anybody else can do it, I can do it regardless. You know, look at Blacks, you know, whatever. I can do it. And that's where I was.

All I've got to do is just get up. Get up. Suit up. Boot up, you know. Do it because it's for me. I'm invested in Tony because, you know, I've invested in everything else. What did he (God) give me? The homeboys, we go to jail, I stay and they get out. And I'm wondering what the hell is going on? How come I'm still in it, you know? (self talk).

N: You said you were a vet and that's what gave you access to a place to stay when you were released from prison. Tell me more. What branch of the service were you in and …

T: The Army. I only stayed in there two years. And I should have stayed longer. I got drafted. I thought I was in love. So I had to hurry up and get back and find out. I should have stayed but… [Laughter]

N: I know there's another story there, right? [Laughter]

T: So, but yeah. And then I had a chance there too. I had a chance to join the police department. I worked at UCLA and they wanted me to join the police department. I was like giving traffic tickets out at UCLA, right. So when I come down to Venice, I had on a uniform. But you know, I still was dabbling in the environment. So I feel like if I was a police officer, I

would be a sissy, which I should have went on and did, because I caught a case. They said "Oh, you switched sides, huh?" I said "What? They said, "Yeah, we got it. You wanted to be a sheriff. You have an application to be a sheriff in here but you decided you want to be a criminal. So you take this." And they gave me time in jail, right? From that point on, things just escalated.

N: So it appears your situations had a lot to do with decisions that you made. On what did you base your decisions? Was it peer pressure, wanting to be accepted by your friends even though they weren't doing the same things that you were doing? Was it a matter of wanting to belong?

T: So I was an extremist. I was telling this guy at church yesterday. It was whatever I did, I believe in trying to be the best at it. If I was going to do wrong, I would be good at it. If I was going to do right, I would try to be the best I could be. I was going to compete. We grew up in the environment where everybody was quote/unquote players or hustlers, you know. So as a youngster you were around that. And they protected me. And whereas you thought you were—.

N: You mean older guys?

T: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. They would take us in. Come on man. Come on, just go round with me. And they would start schooling you on things, you know. Telling you about girls and this and that and the other. You know what I'm saying. And they would talk to you, you know - so whatever they would say, it was supposed to go this way and not supposed to go that way. This is how it's supposed to go. However, by not being in that environment, I see the difference now in the guys that had bonds,[4] stuff like that, they didn't step out there. They were there hearing

[4] Bonds as in marriage, employment, social ties (see Laub, J., & Sampson, R. J. (2001), Understanding desistance from crime, *Crime & Justice,* 28, 1-69.

the same talk. They wanted friends but when it came to stepping over the line it was like oh no, I can't do that.

The guys that don't have fathers, we continued down the path. And that made a big difference too you know, as far as being a Black man. The importance of the father which we don't have has become a thing of mine because I see how important it is. And yet everybody that I know now that was surrounded and rooted in that mother/father thing, they were looking more stable than us that only had one parent. If the father was MIA, then it was something that threw everything off kilter. And I'm not saying everybody was bad. I'm just saying from what we came from and about how the hustlers and the players got hold of us and showed us the cars, the clothes, the money, and the females. And okay this is it, you know.

If I can do it like this, hey, why not, you know. And then what we did was say everybody that worked became squares. They're not like us. You know, we're here. We know what we're doing. And we didn't know jack. [Laughter]. You know, because we ***thought*** *we knew. Now I wish that I had been a square. I wish I had because everybody that I know that was square got a whole lot where I'm just now starting to live. My life is just now coming into being. And everybody else's is slowing down. And it's hard. And from the point of being a criminal to converting back to life, it's really, really difficult. It's easier to be a criminal than it is to be responsible. I don't know if you understand what I'm saying.*

N: No, I don't and I really want to know so tell me more.

T: Getting up and going to work- I mean getting a little bit of money is very difficult because you've got people depending on you. You have people looking at you to be committed to them and to be like the way they are committed. When you're a criminal, you're selfish. You get up when you want to get up because if you are good at what you do, you know you're going to make

a large amount of money in a small amount of time. The only problem you have to worry about is what you can't account for - the unexpected that could put you in jail.

N: Explain that to me. Is it because of the high risk?

T: You could plan everything and lay it out right. But it's always something sometime that's going to happen out of the clear blue sky that you didn't anticipate that can make it so you don't get back. Or, you can be so good and you can get away with it and have to worry about the police kicking the door in because something pointed towards you. But still you were free—but, you were selfish. You weren't committed to nobody but you. And whatever you was doing, you looked slick. And then you always got the money and you got out. You celebrated the way you wanted to but you didn't care about your mother, your brothers, your sisters, or nobody else. There was no responsibility attached to it, because I know if I get in jail, they're going to take care of me outside. You know, I have somebody. I have a place to go back to.

N: Explain your reference to family; who is family to you?

T: Yeah, you know I have a mother (nodding in my direction). But you get into a point where you just disregard everybody else and what they do. But I find out now that when you have people looking to you to be responsible, you have to solve the problem. You have to be there. There ain't no excuse for you not being there. You have to be committed to a cause in life because they need you. And that's rough. That's rough because the responsibility don't go away. It don't go at all, and you can't quit. See, when you're out on the street, you can quit. You can go to jail and relax in jail, But you know, being straight[5] is about the hardest thing I have ever done.

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[5] Being "straight" in the context of Tony's statement means desisting from crime; living a life free of criminal activity.

(Tony talks about his vacillation between the pull of the street life and his determination to keep free of drugs and crime). Yeah, it's in me for keeps you know, the thought of it. Yeah, I think I can go do this, and I can go do that out there. Then I say no, I can't go do that. I'm out of there. I'm away from it. But it's so much a part of you in here (pointing to his head) that it never goes away. It's always there.

N: You seem always tempted by the life you've led in the past. What's that like?

T: Yeah. It's always there. The ability to keep straight is more spiritual than anything else because when you're out there you can't stop on your own. So he's sending his little angels, and they stop you. And they'll keep kind of pulling you back, you know. They'll send agents in the form of people to try to pull you back. And you have to just think I can't do that.(recidivate) I mean that was yesterday. Why do I want to go back into something that I'm just out of, and I already know what it is. But it is always, and this is part of insanity. You can always think you can do things better than you did before. Almost the same thing… See? You get blinded (Self-talk).

And you'll be thinking oh, I can go back and do this, and it's going to be different. And always it turns out the same thing. It ain't different. Because we think we can bring into play the board of life. I mean there's a game of life that we think we can make something of this and not ignore it. All of the games have already been played so we just repeating. And we as a person - it ain't nothing new that you can bring to the human existence that ain't already here as far as your thought and emotions and stuff like that.

Now maybe as far as knowledge goes, like what you're trying to do here with your research - you can do something different. You can help make people different because you're into intellect. You're trying to get into the psyche of people and see what's what. You can have a

different effect, but for everybody else that thinks this is a game and this is really nothing, you know. You can't see outside of the bigger picture. You can't see the bigger picture. You're rocking the boat, and you're not going to affect anything. It's just in you. And it amazes me that I can see people walking down the street -, and I'm glad I have some kind of inside feeling -.and it looks like they just came out of a time warp dressed in a suit like 1968. [Laughter] But you have to realize that was the height when he went to the pen. He had reached the pinnacle of his life and he's still there.

N: Oh, I see what you're saying. That's where he got stuck?

T: That's where he got stuck. So even though it's 20 years later, he's still dressed the same way. It's like the movie, "It's the same way it's always done." You know, he's stuck.

N: That's where his…

T: glory and stuff was.

N. Okay, so all right. I get it. Yeah, I get it.

T: It's a game. You understand?

N: I get it.

T: So yeah, that always amazes me because what I did learn is if you stop growing and stop learning, you start dying. So I've always tried to read and learn. My thing is to learn something new every day. So I don't revert back in time- try to grow in knowledge.

N: So what affect did your incarceration have on the community that you were a part of?

T: A devastating affect that I had. Not only monetarily. My affect was more emotional. I've destroyed some people. You know, I mean truly. I didn't do anything crazy. That wasn't me because I didn't have to go there; but there was a lot of dudes that would go in... And I was blamed for stuff that I didn't do.

Now, getting down to what you're saying (Tony relaxes back in his chair), I affected people's bank accounts because of stolen credit cards. There were people that I went to their house several times. Now, they can't sleep with the lights off no more. You know, they have to sleep with bars on their windows. So it had a tremendous affect. I didn't know. At that time I didn't count it as anything other than this is what I had to do. Because when I got up every morning, I had to have $10,000 in my pocket. When the sun came up, I don't care if I didn't go to sleep for a week, 15 or 20 days; every day I got up I had to have some money. My goal was to have $10,000 in my pocket when the sun came up every morning. So at home all around the house I had $7,000 or $8,000, $9,000 stuffed in socks, in drawers. You could be with me and never know I had that much money. It would be stuffed in old coat pockets. It was just that I didn't have nobody to trust to give this money to, nobody.

N: What about your family? What affect did your criminal life and your incarceration have on your family?

T: Well, it totally destroyed my mother. But she still believed in me, and I give her credit because she saw through me to where I was. All the people told her let that nigger go, let him go. He ain't no good. Give him up. She told me, she said people want me to leave you alone, but I didn't raise you this way. Whatever way you've turned out to be, I didn't raise you this way, you know. And I know what's in you. What's wrong with you though? It got to the point just before this last time that she was at the end of her rope. But yeah, it totally did destroy her, you know, because they have beliefs in you and she saw where I was going. I was soaring above the clouds and all of a sudden there was a flip. I started crashing and burning. I was soaring above the clouds and all of a sudden I crash dive and burn. And really it hurt her (pause and deep sigh).

My father, I think it affected him, too. But he had a different way. He kept it internal. But for myself, I had to sit down and think about this while I was in the penitentiary. You know, what is wrong with me? A lot of that was his fault. However, I can't blame it entirely on him, because I had a decision to make. And I made the wrong decision. Decisions have consequences. And if you think that just because you're tied up in your environment that you're making the right decision, you need to step out of the box and reevaluate. If all of the decisions when you look into something are wrong decisions because of your thought processes -- when you start making wrong, right and right, wrong; then your thinking is off. See? My thinking was off. What I thought was right was totally against society.

N: Is there anything that could have happened to help you change your life at the time that you were going through your criminal activities?

T: Well, some things did happen. I had people that wanted to intervene and I had people talking to me. The main thing that happened, and I don't know how to say this, but God had a lot to do with it. And it's a hard thing to say in this day and age. My last little jolt in CRC I started having dreams. But I've always had them—more or less visions. And the last one I had I was sitting up and I was in the bathroom. J.S. came and he said, "What's wrong with you? It's 3:30 in the morning." He said, "Why are you sitting on the toilet? You using the toilet? I said, "No, I'm not using the toilet. I'm just sitting here." And I explained I can't go to sleep and this and that and the other, you know. Something is bothering me. And he said, "Well let's pray over it." So me and him prayed and I went back to bed, and I thanked him.

But I was having these dreams. When I get out of prison, the dreams started manifesting themselves. Everything that I was shown started coming true. So I stopped my criminality for like a seven-year period. Instead of doing something with it—what I was give— I was with some

new people and they pissed me off. You know what I'm saying? It had to do with drugs. Okay, so now I had to go prove my point, and I went out and I did something that got me back in the bad space.

N: I heard you say several things during the interview that being Black and without a father was a factor for you and that not having the money to do the things that you wanted to do in the way that you wanted to do them was a factor for you.

T: Yes.

N: and God was also a factor in your life, as well. So what role did these factors have in helping you up out of your criminal life?

T: Yeah. God, hmm… but you know what, how can I say this… (pauses and sits up). We came up in the era with the mindset - and it plays a big part—and as a Black person, we still have, most of us, still have the mindset that the white man ain't going to let us do it. But, it ain't got nothing to do with him. It's an excuse. You know what I'm saying? But we've been misled. How is it that somebody else can come from another country—they're poor when they get here and then they're rich. We're in this country all the time and stay broke. It's the mindset. You know, regardless of what it is, if you put initiative and importance to it, you can do it. But a lot of us take it (the mindset) for granted because of our color.

And if we have felonies, it's all over. What am I going to do now? Don't nobody want to hire me. How do you know until you start getting out there trying? I mean, I didn't know either 'til I kind of fell into this. What happened was like I said, I was praying. I ran into this guy from the Middle East. We were in Ironwood together. We get out, we still communicate. He's Iranian. And he hooked me up to this brother. Okay so, I hooked up with the brother and I started driving. So God had led me into this, I saw that I could make it. So I set a—goal for me

to try to do this. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but it came about. And that changed my whole life. I started believing and trying to accomplish something for me—to invest in Tony.

N: A lot of the research shows that particularly with Black men with felonies because of their disproportionate arrests and incarceration housing, employment, family relationships and adequate social services are barriers to staying out of trouble and desisting from crime. So once you changed your mindset, as you said, about not being able to get a job to knowing that you could get a job, what other things that you first faced as barriers were you able to overcome?

T: Well you know, my life has been strange. I will explain. I'll start with this. I'm just going through with the knockdowns, okay? And what race and everything did to me. Each time that I've tried to do something, something would always come in and knock me out of the box. Like I said, I wanted to be a baseball player. When the coach came to me, he said look, we need to get this together because you're being scouted. They're going to try to get you out of high school. We're going to try to hook you up with them and whatever university you want to go to. I didn't know at the time, the coach had a racial problem. I found this out later.

I get into the service. I get into the Army, and they had a program for IBM. And they were only taking 30 students. It's a six-month course and when you graduate and get out of the Army, you can choose wherever in the world you want to go. Expense account, a car, credit cards, whatever you want. You'll be a tech in this part of the world. I chose Amsterdam. That's where I wanted to live.

I took the test. Out of the 300 that took it, I had the third highest score. It was a Japanese and a white boy in front of me. So I'm automatically in the class. I was told the class is at this week and this time. So that was my appointment; no one missed their appointment. And I was there. But when the guy saw me, It was oh no, we can't enroll you. I said, Look, here's my

letter. I have to be enrolled." He said. "Oh no, we can't do it. You'll have to come back." I said, "I can't come back. If I come back, I can't get in the class." He was a sergeant and said you're going to do what I tell you to do. That there really crushed me. So but anyway it was stuff like that, the racial identity. When I got out I wanted to be a computer programmer. This was the early 70's, by me being black, I couldn't. I'm passing all the tests. But they're telling me you can't do this. And then by being an ex-felon and Black…

Today I owe it to clearance from Homeland Security, TSA's clearance; I got TSA now. I can go anywhere at the airport, any security area or whatever. I'm a felon, but still that's not a problem. It's not a barrier anymore. I have a letter from TSA, Homeland Security you know. So there's no problem. And the further I get away from that, that mindset, the better it is for me.

N: So how long has it been since your last incarceration?

T: Fifteen years.

N: Fifteen years?

T: Yeah. Since 1997.

N: Congratulations. If you had to advise some young person now getting out of prison after several years of incarceration, what would your advice be to that person?

T: I talk to young people, especially young Blacks. My thing would be to him, whatever you do, invest in yourself. Take time out from whatever you think or whatever you're trying to do, or whatever you're trying to be and redo you. Rebuild yourself. Get some knowledge. Go somewhere where you can get a different way of thinking. You've got to change the way. If you don't change the way you think, you can't do nothing; because you didn't grow up with a mindset that was grade all A's and B's. You grew up with a mindset that was C's and D's and F's so you have to change the way you think. You have to invest in yourself. Because, after all, when it

comes down to it, you're all you've got. If you can't trust in yourself and believe in yourself, you're not going nowhere. If you can't love yourself, you can't love nobody else. If you can't be committed and responsible to you, you have to redo you first. Then somebody will help you.

What I learned a long time ago when I was in sports, this Jewish guy came up to me and said you may not know it but when you're involved in certain things, when you are trying to make it over, there are people watching you. He said they may not say nothing. They might not even approach you. They may want to help you, but they just want to see what you're going to do. And if you don't do what you should do or go in the direction that you should go in, you'll never know it because they won't make themselves available to you because they know they can't mess with nothing that's messy.

I didn't pay attention to that and it cost me dearly. I can see the ravages of my life now. There are things now that I'm saying wow, I'll never be…all because I got too old too quick. I mean this is bad. Now you want to relive it but you can't. This only goes around one time. If you don't do it now, it's not going to get done. Just like right now I hope you are enjoying our little conversation because this is time we can't recapture. We can't risk trying to recapture this right? We can't redo this.

So it's a hard feel thing with me. I'm sorry to a lot of people. I hurt a lot of people. I left destruction. I came through—my mother used to tell me - like a bull in a china cabinet. I just have broke up a whole lot. I left a lot of broken stuff behind me. And I'm just trying not to be tearing on that garbage with you. Yeah, I have my guilt and stuff like that. I do know that I was a product of my environment and I brought a lot of that on myself. I'm trying to get rid of the garbage. I'm just trying to live out the rest of my life the best way I possibly can, even if prior

criminal activity is always holding me like I'll always be a con man and a felon - but to me, I'm not.

N: What do you mean when you say that? Do you mean that society will always see you as a con man and a felon?

T: Right. Society. They want to tag you. So the system tags you. But you can still, if you invest in yourself, just get up and be a hustler within you. You can still come up out of that. The system can't hold you down unless you let it hold you down. And that's what my problem was. I'd get out of prison and my mother and others would beg me to get a job, go to school. I'd go half- but go to school! [He made a nixing motion with his hands) I was just faking and shaking. My main life and my main goal was criminal, because that's what I knew. I was comfortable. I was comfortable in that life. And to be a part of it - and I'm ashamed to say it -is well, I would kind of like it. [Laughter] I loved it as a matter of fact.

N: Let me ask you this question: So how long have you been working?

T: In my own business, for over ten years.

N: The research indicates statistically that if you make it through the first three years of parole, the likelihood of a released prisoner continuing to stay out increases. So what was it like your first three years after your last incarceration?

T: It was a message to me because like I said, I got into the trucking industry. And it was to totally be incognito in my environment. What helped—I was going to San Francisco, Sacramento, Chico, Santa Rosa, you name it; Las Vegas, Yuma, Arizona. I was really at home.

N: Delivering in your truck?

T: Yeah. So I lived in my truck or in motel rooms. And I would see things going on in the motel rooms. Or people would come and say man, you want this, you want that? It was either make

another bad decision or enjoy what I was given at this particular moment. And looking on it now, it was rough. It was rough because I wanted to… maybe kind of …it was maybe, well, who is going to know? You know what I'm saying? I'm up here by myself. Who's going to know what I'm doing? Because I can just fake it when I get back without it, you know. And the thing is I couldn't start lying to myself again. I couldn't be a lie to me because that would defeat the investment that I had made in myself,

So yeah, what helped me a lot? I stayed and lived in my truck and dedicated myself to being on the road. That kept me from trying to come back and see the homeboys you know what I'm saying, when I have nothing to do. So like right now, I still have a friend so I stay at home most of the time because I'm comfortable.

N: Does this decision go back to your theme of changing your environment -. not going back to where you were and not being involved in the things that you were involved in.

T: Right. And see like now when I see where this is, what it's done to me. It's put in perspective what home girls and home boys that I have respected that wasn't a part of that life. They had enough sense not to go the way I went. So it's really a blessing for me to be with them. They're professionals, and you know, retired. Everybody is doing something with their lives. They have their kids, their grandkids, which I don't have. And that's a part of what I'm saying I miss - I can't never have. But, I can be around them and appreciate them in a way knowing that I can trust them and they're not going to backstab me.

So I mean there's no question there. There's just love instead of all of that worrying about being around somebody that's going to hurt me and to be around people that I respect. If they're returning love—they may not love me all the way because they've seen... but you know it's there. At least I accept it to a certain degree and that's nice. That's nice. I'm going to church

and being accepted. I'm not looked upon as the same as I was. I know people think I'm still the same person, but the further you get away from the people you were with in the wrong environment, the better off you are. So it's a blessing to have another way.

N: So what do you see in your future? You still have a lot of living to do.

T: I'm involved in the ministry. There are some things happening that if it jumps off, then I will be going to Hong Kong. Right now I just want to grow up. I just want to rise. I mean there's no limit. As long as I don't put limitations on me, it's all right. I just want to be unlimited because on my best day, I'm just thinking about living. I know my thing ain't smoking because I'm in my truck thinking man, you know…

(His mood and momentum changes and he appears to reflect on his past as in the opening of the interview.) But yeah, it's just being a part of that environment, a criminal environment. It's just being that mindset that I'm Black and I'm defeated and all of that. It's not to say that people didn't come up. I mean for yourself [referring to N] you didn't feel that way. You know what I'm saying? But that's because you didn't step over that line and sell out to the game.

Once you cross over you know you don't see no way out. Whereas a lot of people go to school and all of this, and they hope their knowledge opens them up to something else; it's all about what I can't do. It's not about what I can do. It takes constantly telling yourself that ***I can*** *do this. The white man can do anything—you know what I'm saying. You're living in reality.*

So you can do something! (an emphatic statement to himself). And that's, I mean, this (old) mindset is coming on down, okay? This is my low. It wasn't, but… [clearly emotional and tearing].

I'm seeing it (the past) like it's now. I didn't see it like that. You know, how I felt defeated and down. Didn't know how I was going to get out and without no hope. That was when I always felt like I didn't have no hope. I felt hopeless. You know, I know I should be doing better. I even had the nerve to run around telling others I know I can do better; I just need a vehicle (a truck) to help me. I know that the vehicle was me. If you help yourself, then you can be a vehicle to get out of your hopelessness. But you've got to believe in yourself, you're hiding out from your family and whatever. You got to let somebody help you. Somebody has to… we have to open up and let somebody in to turn that light on. And then you can be helped. Other than that, you can't be helped. You can't be helped. You're locked into that environmental thing. If you don't change it, you can't change.

N: Is there anything you'd like to ask me about the research project, this interview, anything?

T: As far as your research goes, I would like you to… you have a lot of insight, and you could be a help to a lot of people. I just hope it can be research that comes from your heart. Mentally you can sit down and you can formulate and put this together in such a way that you will open your eyes and mind to what I've said and I hope it does some good.

N: I'm going to let you see the interview and your story and any comments that I've written so that if there's something included that you don't want to be included in the document, then we can take it out.

T: I'm trying to be perfectly honest with you because I've been knowing you a long time. I can face it today. I don't have nothing to be ashamed of. I was, and I know that I've come out of it. I'm not that today. So I feel there's no embarrassment. It is what it is. I did what I did. And this is great. I'm happy that I can talk a little bit. I'm happy that the criminal piece is behind me. So

this is like it's based on life. And then I can now, with a sense of where I was, go back and talk to people who are in that situation without having any bad consequences.

Like I was talking to some girl the other night. I was on my way to San Diego at 3 o'clock in the morning and she was telling me she didn't have anywhere to go. She's homeless. I was putting gas in my truck. I gave her a dollar. And I said well, I'm going to go. And she said I don't have nowhere to go. I said you don't have no friends? She says I don't have any friends. And I said listen, there's Jesus as a friend. You know, I'm saying to myself, I'm not too far from where she is. I just had to give thanks for where I am, because I was there. I was there.

So it's being thankful. And like I said, maybe your research and what you're doing can turn the tide that what it is, is being in prison. That mindset is the mental prison because we lock ourselves up. I'm telling you this, it's hard to explain when you're in it because you can't see it. You know, that they're all lying to us. You're telling yourself, but you've been in it so long… you know it's bad. You know you're speaking of the help that's needed but you just don't know how to get it. And then a lot of times you won't accept it because it's sort of like it's hopeless like I'm just not going to change anything anyway, you know, it is what it is. So hopefully a lot of good things and good purpose will come out of this. At least it gives somebody an idea of which areas to go in, what they can look for.

N: I thank you for your time and for your candid story.

Researcher's Discussion

Tony's story is complex as are most narratives of lived experiences. The complexity deepened as he moved back and forth from present to past, to places that he shared and to those that only spoke through the contours of his facial expressions, left to my interpretation. Having known of him for more than 50 years, I wondered where was I during the 50 years of his

criminality. I purposely screened out the inclination to dig into my head to try to pull into remembrance anything anyone may have told me back in the days of burglaries, drug sales, and other illegal escapades he tells in his story. I did not want to taint my inquiry with a recall that may not have any validity.

Although he has been free of criminal behavior for 15 years, he lived in his story as he spoke it (Riessman, 1993). In large part, his was as much a performance as it was a story. Hands slicing through the air, body leaning forward, slouching, straightening, foot movement and a slap of his thigh, the many rhetorical "you know" statements—spoke a language both of the street and of his cultured upbringing. The taxonomy of the street, the "fast life" of a dope dealer and the degraded life of a drug addict, and the despondency of prison came through loudly and credible.

I observed him in this story, sitting on the bench in prison fretting over the plight of the upcoming altercation between the Blacks and the Mexicans. He moves from present to past, from first person context to third person narrations about himself to himself.

Tony shared that having the experience of living and playing in a multi-racial-ethnic environment afforded him the development, understanding, and personal growth to get along with all sorts of people. The educational environment where he went to school, played baseball, and developed friendships with whites and Mexicans, and the socio-ethnical and religious values he learned from his mother and other adults in his neighborhood were invaluable. The Black families in Santa Monica were close, everyone knew everyone and Tony said he would not trade his growing up in Santa Monica for anything. He maintains many of those community and friendship bonds today and believes that those bonds, returning to the roots of his upbringing, the culture and early lessons in life from his mother and the church are what helped him change from a life of crime to desisting from criminal behavior.

From the lens of the researcher. What happened to drive Tony to criminal behavior? He had a mother who loved him and did her very best to give him what he needed, he had an integrated educational experience where there was relative harmony when to the contrary in southern states whites were railing against the integration of schools and Black children had to be escorted to class by the National Guard, and he lived in a community that mirrored the adage that, it takes a village to raise a child. How did he become one of the millions of incarcerated people in America?

The absent father. In the interview where Tony shared his life story he conveyed that his father was MIA (Missing in Action) and not a part of his life. His mother did the best she could but could not satisfy his taste in clothing. It was important to his image and ability to be on par with his peers to dress well. At age 16 to get money for clothes of his liking he began committing burglaries.

The environment. Tony grew up in Santa Monica, CA in a racially segregated, economically diverse community of African Americans. Although Tony's father was MIA and the same was true for a number of his friends, there were families with both mother and father in the home. For the most part, parents worked, children went to school and graduated, crime was low, church was a huge influence, and even though among the community there were poor people, they fared no less in the city than well-off Black people. White society was not interested in the economic status of African Americans; every Black person was the same, substandard. Whatever the family's profile, the neighborhood was generally harmonious. If a career in baseball was a possible ticket to material possessions and a more affluent life, it was taken away with a fist to the face of his coach. After all, who can take the risk of having a violent Black man on the team?

The desire to belong and be accepted is a powerful force. That desire was the impetus for Tony to find a way to fit in and keep up with a lifestyle that represented prosperity and power, and it took him down a path of criminality and violence.

Tony's turning point. In a flash of insightfulness brought on by impending danger where he could lose his life while in prison, the reality of his circumstances and life confronts him—it's his birthday, and he's 50 years old. 50! It was that moment and the talk he had with himself that changed his mind from who he had been and the life he had lived to the mindset of becoming a man reformed from criminal life to freedom.

Through his efforts of personal transformation that included deep reflection of his life and behavior, reaching back to his church upbringing and accepting God in his life, getting and keeping a truck driving job, and digging deep within to find the strength to overcome the temptations of criminal behavior and the devastating habit of drug addictions, as of this writing Tony has desisted from crime and lived free from re-incarceration for more than 15 years.

My Lived Experience: My Personal Transition From Crime to Desistance as Told by A.S.

The background of A.S. A.S. is a 43 year old African American male who grew up in Venice, CA. Starting at age 17 and over the next 16 years, A.S. was arrested multiple times and was sentenced to prison on three different occasions: all for possession and sale of narcotics. He was in and out of jail or prison, staying only brief periods on the streets before re-arrest and re-incarceration. He served various lengths of time incarcerated from as few as two months to as many as three years.

A.S. told his story with a directness that seemed to say, "you can take it or leave it, like it or not, but this is how it was and this is how I am." His words were quick and staccato with brief, thoughtful pauses at times where he seemed to ask himself if he should say what he was

thinking or not. I had no doubts throughout his telling of his story that he said exactly what he was thinking.

A.S's story. A.S. responds to my questions about the crimes he committed and the prison terms he served.

DissClip 4.02 Aaron Back to Basics

The crimes, illegal drugs and punishment. *I think it was maybe June of '95 til December 15 of '96. I stayed out about thirty days and got sent back to jail January 31st…did like an almost 90-day violation. Got out maybe a couple of months, March maybe. Stayed out til August, went right back and it was '97 August…. did two year term til October 2nd of '99. After that stayed out a couple of more months and got another two-year term. I don't remember an exact date that I was incarcerated but after that I was released again in October…2001My mom told me that once I got an education—graduated from high school—I could do anything I wanted to. Most of my friends were already in the streets. I dibbled and dabbled in the street a little and then I was full scale in the streets… trying to help take care of my family by any means necessary…I wasn't thinking about getting any kind of job at the time. Once you have a prison record nobody wants to hire you.*

A.S. was only 17 when he joined his peers in selling drugs in the streets. Two thirds of all people in prison for drug offenses are people of color (The Sentencing Project, 2013). He did not consider arrest and incarceration a big deal. His demeanor projected an attitude of expected

and accepted incarceration as a sequenced chapter of his street life. It was common among the homies—as a rite to passage into acceptance in the streets and the gang—to go to jail or prison. A.S. has done time in both places of confinement. As is the case for many young Black men, it is not uncommon for fathers and sons or uncles, nephews, or cousins to find themselves together in the same prison.

I would just do my time and think about getting back out there to get mine. I have a lot of uncles and they all have been to prison—can't think of one who hasn't.

Crime, arrest, sentencing, and imprisonment are horrifying prospects to most people, but for A.S. and his associates these consequences of criminality were as normal as breathing.

The absent father. A.S. was raised by his mother, a single parent. His father died when he was very young so he did not have anyone to teach him how to be a man.

We didn't have no disciplinary dudes around us to show us a different kind of way; we had no structure for us being a man. We didn't have nobody to tell us really to stay in school or to have things for us to do to encourage us to do better things."

In response to my inquiry about his transition from crime to stopping his criminal behavior, A.S. spoke of what happened in his life to keep him out of prison. He shared that having a job made the difference in his ability and desire to change from a life of crime to a life free of arrests and incarceration.

A friend that I grew up with told me about a job. He said "Hey dude, you fresh out, you need a job. I got the hook up." I looked into it. It was a job delivering parts for automotive dealers. The guy was willing to hire ex-offenders. You had to have your own truck and work as an independent contractor. I ain't looked back since.

In 2007 more than 1.7 million children had a parent in prison or jail (Mauer, 2009). In the interview A.S. talked about his redemptive work with youth.

The point of personal change. *"I was going to the football practices and I'll be seeing those kids out there and I just kept telling myself, I ain't gonna let them be like that. So I asked a dude can I coach and he told me, "No". And I said, "Why? I coach better than all of them or know more than them [referring to other coaches]. He told me, "You're a street nigger. You can't come out here and you can't coach these kids." I was like, "Well you don't even know how to tell my nephew to get in a three point stand—and, I know you." He said, "You can't come out here and coach… you gonna be a bad influence. You're gonna be a dream killer." I said, "Why, because I use to sell drugs? How about I don't do none of that and you give me one chance to coach and if I do…if I mess up, then I can't coach no more." He said, "You can start next year."*

"In two years I won the championship -- that just goes to show you…. I rounded all my buddies' kids that I knew their daddy was dead or in jail and they are going to championship. And, right now they are playing football at the high school with the DA's [district attorney's) son that sent us to prison. How about that?"

To sustain his personal transformation, A,S, continues coaching youth football as a means of helping boys and young men of incarcerated parents develop self-esteem and to understand that they can be somebody of great worth in this life.

Researcher's Reflection

After hearing about the influence of the community where he grew up, being raised by his mother, not having a father in his life, not knowing how to capitalize on his athleticism as a high school football player, dealing drugs to care for his family, I understood what had been the

mindset of A.S. He, like thousands of young Black men in America, grew up in economically and educationally deprived circumstances where criminal behavior, e.g. drug dealing, is embraced as an acceptable (and in some instances the only) means to a viable economic end. Such was the life of A.S. so it is no wonder that prison is not so much a threat as it is an expected consequence of life.

Told through his voice, his words, told at his own pace, with body language signaling unspoken memories, at times A.S. seemed as if he was speaking to himself more than to me about a person he once knew, but no longer. His periodic smile came after reflective pauses and I imagined he was musing over his past and happy that it was, in fact, his past.

I enjoyed my role as observer (Behar, 1996). Several times I realized I had stared at him too long, fixed on his story, his mannerisms—nonchalant—as he spoke. I felt that I might make him uncomfortable and cause him to refrain from candor and openness, but that did not appear to happen. I was so engaged in his story it brought to mind "being in the midst" (Clandinin, 2007). I worried that I was not maintaining a position of a good researcher, one of objectivity and distance from emotional engagement. I thought, how wonderful he has changed and he is free. As the researcher/interviewer, the interview with A.S. touched a part of me that revived hopefulness that the disproportionate number of African American men in the penal systems will find their way to beat the societal odds against them.

A telling portrait of his life is painted of his life before, during, and following two decades of crime and punishment. While institutions that are designed to assist ex-felons overcome barriers to reentry, such as parole officers, state funded reentry programs, jobs, and assistance programs, these were not helpful to A.S. He found essential support in family and friends and, most beneficial, employment. Much of the literature supports the premise that

employment encourages desistance and, therefore, detracts from the possibility of recidivism (Benda et al., 2003; Laub & Sampson, 1998, 2001). Above all, his own fortitude and commitment were his redeeming factors for asserting and maintaining his freedom and continuing to desist from crime.

A.S. was last released in October, 2001 and has not been rearrested or incarcerated and has maintained employment with the same company to which his friend referred him. During the round table discussions, the focus group participants chose A.S. as the chairperson of their committee to organize a project to make positive changes in the lives of youth. A.S. has committed to expanding his leadership role as a coach to one of a change agent for youth, in general.

The Focus Group: Tony, A.S., Papa John, Michael M, Bobby, Michael R., Anthony, Lynn

The environment. All participants in this study, except one, were raised in the predominantly Black, segregated communities of Santa Monica or Venice, CA. The one participant was raised in Watts, CA. The socio-economic conditions in Watts and Venice were similar except Venice, a beach front community, had better access to nearby resources like markets and department stores in Santa Monica and surrounding cities. The Black community in Santa Monica, although segregated, was somewhat better off economically because of the residual benefits of the surrounding wealthy neighborhoods. Because there was only one public high school to serve everyone, regardless of race or ethnicity, segregation ended, and integration began at the gates of Santa Monica High School.

The criminal justice system, courts and judges up to the mid-1970s were guided by indeterminate sentencing laws for convictions. These sentencing guidelines gave the courts some leeway and flexibility in sentencing, i.e. a range such as 5 years to life could be imposed,

and the convicted person would serve the minimum sentence prior to eligibility for parole consideration. A felon could be released early due to good behavior.

Beginning in the 1980s when most participants, three in this study, were highly active in criminal behavior, legislators and public officials pushed for get tough on crime policies and laws and were successful in implementing determinate sentencing, a mandatory minimum sentencing policy promoting stricter, harsher, sentences and one which denied judges any discretion in sentencing. The Rockefeller Drug Laws were established specifically to address the problems of illegal drugs. These laws began a movement by law enforcement to concentrate efforts to increase arrests and convictions for drug violations. This period involving heightened police actions and territorial fights between gangs over the control of the drug trade, known as the drug wars.

Crack cocaine was a cheaper form of powder cocaine; therefore, it was most readily trafficked and used in poor and minority communities. The high rate of arrests and conviction for drugs contributed to the overcrowded conditions in prisons California, exceeding capacity by over 200% in 2010 (BJS 2011). The total estimated number of sentenced prisoners under state jurisdiction for drugs listed in the Bureau of Justice 2011 Report is 237,000 (Carson & Sabol, 2011). Of that number 105,600 are Black males, compared to 69,500 Caucasians, and 47,800 Hispanics. Nearly half (48%) of inmates in federal prison were serving time for drug offenses in 2011.

As a result of their gang affiliation, a court ordered injunction was imposed that, among other things, placed known gang members on a curfew and prevented their socialization with other gang members, even if they were family. Because of their criminal behavior and especially because of involvement with illegal drugs, all of the participants were subject to the high

probability of arrest, conviction, and re-incarceration unless and until they turned away from criminality.

Participants speak of the turning point when their life changed towards a process of desistance from crime. Confirming desistance not only as a process but also as conscious choice to stop committing criminal acts, participants admit to missing aspects of their past lives but not enough to return to criminal behavior with all the accompanying risks, the least being re-incarceration.

The effects of the violence, injunctions, arrests for felony criminal offenses, and subsequent incarcerations had devastating impacts on the social and economic structures of the community. Many young African American men were arrested and served time like the participants in this study. They are the fortunate ones because those who did not reach or adhere to a turning point were convicted under the Three Strikes law and are serving life sentences in one of California's 33 prisons.

The voices around the talking table. The large round kitchen table around which the participants sat for the focus group discussion gathered them in closely. As each positioned himself, no one appeared to mind the closeness. I had purposely chosen to seat them at the dining room table instead of setting up the rectangular conference table because I wanted the potential for social bonding (Riessman, 1993) that comes more easily in a circle where participants can see and be more connected to one another. The men knew or were, at least, familiar with one another but had never engaged in group conversation, particularly about their criminal pasts. Here they sat in close physical and visual proximity, speaking and listening and sometimes speaking all at once so that I was obliged to intervene and ask that they speak one at a time so I could hear and record their dialogue.

Although the narrative inquiry research did not direct its study on community impacts of criminality and roles the participants may have played in any such effects, it is contextual information for the reader to know that all of the participants came from communities in which their parents and/or family members had long histories of residency and involvement in the community. I also did not set out to code themes in the stories but found commonalities among the participants interesting. Typically, participants had the following surface in their stories:

- no father in the home or male influence in their life;
- raised by a mother or grandmother;
- family low income or on welfare, except for two participants;
- completed high school
- engaged in criminal activities as a source of income to take care of family; afford material things, such as clothing, jewelry, and cars; live an upscale life style, impress peers, and attract women;
- involved in the possession, use, sale of illegal drugs;
- began criminal activities before or by age 18; and
- served multiple jail and or prison sentences

A brief background of the participants. Tony (whose story is told in full at the beginning of the chapter) began his criminal career at age 16. Burglaries were his forte. He tells a powerful story of incredible criminal behaviors and survival of precarious drug-dealing risks which he continued even after serving prison time.

A.S. was young, right out of high school, when he began dealing drugs to help support his family. To him prison was just a respite from the streets and time to "tighten up his game."

Papa John is the oldest among the participants, 74 years. He spent many years operating in the drug subculture before incarceration in a state prison influenced the change to constructive living.

Michael M., unlike most all of the participants except Bobby, was raised with both parents. When he was 14 years old, his dad left the family, and Michael M. chose to pursue life like the "guys with the money, cars and women." His choice was the pathway to criminal acts and eventually several prison terms.

Michael R. was raised by his single mother who was a drug addict. Her lifestyle laid the groundwork for his entry into drug dealing, fast money, and subsequent imprisonment.

Lynn used and sold drugs for many years. He was arrested and incarcerated for drugs so many times that prison was like a second home to him.

Anthony, 32 years old and the youngest of the participants, was the victim of his father's legendary gangster reputation. Known as one of the "baddest" men in the community, Anthony's father was a living legend. He was fearless of the police and his enemies alike, and he had no problem with physical confrontation with either of them. Anthony's desire to emulate his dad's reputation led him to joining a gang and engaging in aggressive and physically violent behavior which got him arrested and imprisoned.

In the follow up interviews and the focus group discussions, I shared the common themes and factors with the participants and asked to what extent did any of these have on their life. Beyond the general classifications of the themes and factors, individual stories revealed very different lived experiences, including pathways to prison, challenges to reentry and recidivism and the defining turning point from crime to desistance.

Voices of the Lived Experiences of a Criminal

Family.

Tony. *...once you get on this side of life you start seeing how important a father is to people that don't have one and I go around telling people, you need a father, you know, and I'll try to talk to them like a father, but I'm not that. I can't take a father's place.*

Papa John. *But these boys need fathers. They need fathers. It's a serious thing because that's where you get the checklist. A boy will try his mother. He'll keep trying her until he gets that weakness, until she breaks down or whatever, and he'll start trying to work her over, you know, because he's angry. He doesn't have that image, you know.*

There's a grief process—you grieve the process of not being fathered. Because whether the father is in the house or whether he's out of the house if he's not really in your life you go through a grieving process. It leads you to have stages of anger and frustrations, disillusions and unresolved issues that you fight with and you struggle with because it always brings out a certain amount of anger in you because you're not part of what the other - the regular - the household family looks like; a mother and a father and the children come together as a family.

When you've got your grandmother and your mother coming in and you've got stepfathers coming in and out and nobody cares about you, you grieve not having the process of being fathered—of being fathered. Because the image of a father has to come from a father and generally the true desires as to what a father would give his child is based on what he's gotten from his father and he's given the structure to have some kind of connection to emulate. We pass things down—from generations down.

There's no blame. It's just you, you got to accept it but the consequence is there. By not having a father I thought by having plenty of money and investing (materially) in my son that

was the way to go. This day my son has been in jail for 16 years for the lifestyle that he saw me do, you know what I'm saying? So lack of ability to choose a role model as opposed to seeing what's available and choosing for myself, the people with the big cars or the big diamond rings, the fancy tailor-made suits and things becomes the father role which becomes the materialistic side of our lives that we, as men, choose to give our kids.

Bobby. *I was raised in a family where momma and daddy were both there and still I was in and out the penitentiary so that's the other side of the coin. You know it ain't because somebody was raised by their grandmother, somebody raised by their mother, somebody raised by their daddy, you know cause I had both parents. Now my father made sure that I knew how to do everything he could do: carpenter, cement masonry, electrician, drywall plasterer, auto mechanic. He'd tell me to bring over a tool and I bring the wrong tool…* [his eyebrows raise and he sighs suggesting his father's displeasure]. *I was molded, like after him , you know, all the way and up to the point where I used to even talk to my mother and tell her about racist jokes that they [white people] made on the drive that we put up with and stuff* [talking about when he went to work with his dad]. *It was degrading. I couldn't see that then* [the way his father accepted it]. *I hit the penitentiary in 1968 and didn't stop until 2003. I could look back and see it now, okay.*

Michael M. *I'm like Bob. I was raised with really good parents. A lot of the problems I see as today started even before my mom and dad's break up and stuff that happened. I started getting high a lot and then around the late 70s and early 80's that drug explosion came in and …they had the girls, they had the cars, they had the money, they had all the jewelry and all this and cause I was 14 under my mom and dad, I did good. You know, lived like they lived. Once they broke up it became a thing—my dad told me I was a man now. I had to make all my decisions and stuff like that, being that I couldn't see him any longer.*

Anthony. *I actually watched my father and the lifestyle he was living and amongst his peers and different relatives and what not. As I was growing up, I saw a lot of gang activity from like drug selling and fights and guns and police officers kicking in my door when I was like 7, 8 years old. Watching them tear up the whole house.*

*I lost my father when I was nine years old. I liked that I remember he was very protective of me and it's like everything I wanted he would give to me. As I grew a little bit older, within the past few years, I've seen, you know, certain relatives and friends of my father and, you know different people they were all just like gangbanging. It looked as if it was the way of life. It looked real good from a child's point of few, you know, as far as men. Thank God for my mother she tried her best to raise me, you know, as a mother should. But, you know at times when people came around, you know, they was involved in this lifestyle so I found myself loving it at a young age and eventually getting jumped in [*initiated into the gang] *when I was in elementary school*.

Michael R. *Like you said, my mom was a single mother. I was raised by two women, my grandmother and my momma. Once my mom got sick, I really was like trying to do better but at the same time I had one foot here and one foot there. I knew she was on drugs. She was doing her thing but at the same time I respected her.*

The involvement and influence of illegal drugs.

DissClip 4.03 Lynn Desisting

Papa John. *I think for me it's really not so much about my addiction to drugs and alcohol; but I've come to understand that the desire and the need for more becomes more important than anything else because it's never enough. Whatever I have is never really enough. It's always I need more—more money, more shoes, more girlfriends, more cars, more diamonds. And it's like a craving disease that grabs most of us because for me, I didn't have a father in my life and when I had to go back and look at my life, I had to look at some things and that I've always been missing something.*

Michael R*. But what made me start selling drugs and get in the streets was I saw her [*his mother] *struggling, raising two boys to be men. My little brother he's been in the NFL; he did all that by her. She made him. He had a choice, he had a decision, he did that. I had a choice and I had decisions. My choice and decisions was being in the streets making money because it was right there in front of me and that's all I knew.*

Anthony*. Now mind you, my whole lifestyle that I was living from the age of, I could say from the age of 18 to about the age of 23, 24, I haven't worked. I haven't worked no normal job. I was selling crack for like, eight or nine years. You know, selling crack, selling crack, selling crack, just slanging, slanging.*

Michael M*. I was just sitting here thinking and going over my lifestyle and I see the gradual progression over a period of time how he [the white man] calls it corporate America, I call it the establishment, the government, who put the Black man back into slavery through drugs because cocaine is not new, it's not nothing new and I started selling in '72 or '73. That was the rich man's drug. Once they found that it was hooking their people someone else came up with the concept to make it cheaper--crack. There's no way in the world that if the United States didn't want drugs in here, there wouldn't be no drugs.*

Lynn. *I grew up in Venice, CA. I first started going to jail in the late 80s. I've been in and out of jail for about 15 years. I sold drugs, used drugs in the community and elsewhere.*

Bobby. *First of all, my first exposure with the law was 1963—disturbing the peace at the neighborhood market on the corner. Then smoking weed was the beginning of my drug-infested life and I went the whole gamut and stayed involved in drugs most of my adult life all the way up to, what- 2008, and sporadically in between there and now. But I've been clean for quite a little while now and it's a matter of growin' out of it for me 'cause I liked what I was doin' when I was doin' it. If somebody said that the environment of growing up in Venice is what caused it—no, what caused it was you likin' that high. And I liked to get high and I kept on getting' high and I kept on getting' high. My crimes were property crimes. Boostin', stealin' out the markets, stuff like that, you know; stole clothes and sold to support a habit, of course. Then, I was always told inside courtrooms that if it wasn't for drugs I wouldn't have been a criminal, at all [*Bobby shrugs his shoulders in an "Oh, well" gesture and chuckles].

I used everything: pills, weed, heroin, cocaine and the whole thing—the whole nine. And the heroin and the cocaine was the ones that latched on the most and kept me involved for the years that I was involved—period.

I have periods of time where I worked…matter of fact worked with people like for the County Health Department for three years as a drug counselor. And, I was clean that whole period of time 'til one day I decided that I didn't want to be clean no more-- so I went back to prison on a violation and that was it. It's no use in me even trying to go into my criminal life because like I said it's all drugs, drug programs and drug-related crimes, you know. I never had enough nerve to burglarize—go in somebody's house and all that old kind of stuff. I never did do that but I did have the nerve to go in those stores and markets and stuff like that, you know.

Criminality and the incarceration experience.

Papa John. *I came out of the service in 1957. I was honorably discharged after two years out of the Navy because they told me I wasn't educated to be in the Navy for a long period of time because my IQ was real low. And that alone… I think that may have had a stigma on me for the fact that I needed to prove to me that I was worth something and I was somebody.*

My first incarceration was in 1968; I was about 32 or 33. I was working in an automobile place and I stole a battery. They gave me six months. As time went on it went from one thing to another. I got into bookmaking and numbers and stuff like that. Eventually, the lifestyle became more attractive. In the more attractive lifestyle I was wasting more money than what people were doing things with…having a lot of things I wanted or that I thought I needed. So they (material things) *became my idols. To have the kind of things that they have, the kind of cars they have, the tailor made suits and the diamonds and things. So all these things became real attractive to me and by any means necessary I was after to be like the big ones. It was important to be a big shot. I wanted to be like somebody. I never knew who I wanted to be, but I always wanted to be like somebody. So these were my role models.*

The second time I was arrested for bookmaking numbers, for running numbers. I was running numbers and I think somebody tipped the police off. I was slinging some money and turning the corners in a fast car and threw the money in the gutter. They went in the gutter and they finally stopped me. They gave me time served in the county jail.

I got arrested for aiding… for selling drugs, for possession of firearm and drugs. During this time the system was set up whereas if you paid a lawyer enough money and stuff, and you paid enough things to people in high places…I think I paid like about $50,000 at the time. This was the early 1980s and the time was waived and the case was thrown out for whatever reason, I

think. But the more money you have at the time, during this time, whatever you were in if you had enough money, you could pay it off at the time and you could pay enough money on a basic thing like that and you would get off. And the last time I went was when I sold this dope to my mother's son, she sold to the police and then turned me in—she sent me to the penitentiary. I couldn't plea bargain because the system would not allow it. I don't know whether they would but the system is kind of messed up because what they did was made her tell on me and wanted me to tell on somebody else. It just flows right on down. I got three years and that was in 1979, I think, around 1979 or 1980, something like that.

A.S. *I was living in low income housing, going to school. I had a passion for football and sort of sprained my angle real bad—was always a little guy with a bad attitude, never was given a chance 'cause I had a bad attitude, never had nobody to sit me down and teach me how to maintain until I got what I wanted. And from there it just turned into like I couldn't play football. I needed money… like a couple of my friends everybody was in the street except me. I think I was one of the last guys to get into the street. My mom told me that once I got an education and graduate, I can do what I want so, I sort of dibbled and dabbled in the street a little bit, selling narcotics, doing anything to hustle and get money and then I was full scale in the streets… trying to help take care of my family by any means necessary. Selling drugs was the only employment I was doing at the time. I wasn't worried about getting no job.*

Once you have a prison record nobody wants to hire you.

I went to youth authority when I was 17 and to prison three different times. The first time was Delano State Prison, the second was Pleasant Valley State Prison and, like I said, I'm on parole from there and went right back after about 90 days to Pleasant Valley State Prison and from there that was the end of my incarceration.

Anthony. *So I grew more into the lifestyle (gangbanging) at school, I can say like, picking up the ability to print read good so I found myself you know writing the graffiti on different paper then it started off on walls and stuff like that. I pretty much carried he lifestyle from elementary school to junior high school. Once I got to junior high school, that was like my, seemed like it was like, a sense of freedom for me to get around more people and come out and start gangbanging more, you know. I had friends and cousins that I grew up with you know we all found ourselves gangbanging together and pretty much just causing problems, you know, fighting people, starting trouble for no apparent reason. You know, just looking for an opportunity to express the gang life and what not.*

I was expelled from continuation school and I tried to get back into high school but it was like "…no, we had enough of you". I was really a trouble maker. A part of it was like living up to my father's reputation; that was something I thought was cool. You know, I'm saying even when I got stopped by the police they would say, "Oh, you're a _____*(*last name withheld*)? Who is (*his dad's name*) to you?" That's my father. "That's your father?" You know automatically they're on alert, wanna search you for tattoos and stuff. I kind of like followed in his footsteps you know, to a certain extent. I was a hard core gang member. I'm talking about blue rag folded up in my left pocket so nobody could see it—if I'm off the job, I let it show. You know I'm talking about one of the worst attitudes that you can find but I had respect for my elders. You know a lot of people tell me that right now today being that they see that I've changed.*

I was in and out of jail for the gang injunction at least seven times—you're not supposed to hang around other gang members. That's what the gang injunction said—couldn't have a pager or cell phone, it was like, I felt like my rights been stripped away, you know, like I went to

jail for being with my uncle. I had a case behind that. I have lost of cousins and with the gang injunction it didn't matter if they were a relative.

They started sending me straight to High Tower. It's like the worst part of Los Angeles County jail, like where they send like the people who actually get caught for killing people. You know, so that's where I done time there. My first time actually going to jail, I was 18 years old. I went to jail for terrorist threat with a gun but they didn't find the gun. I knew I was eventually gonna end up going to jail cause of the way I was living. From the process of me going in and out the county jail for like at least like two or three years, I ended up going to prison for the same thing I went to jail for; a criminal threat. They called it a criminal threat cause I was a known gang member.

Had they (the people testifying against him) told the truth God is my witness, I'd a went home. But that happened for a reason, I had to go through that for a reason, I think because everything that I was doing from my past, so being that I was in that situation I was looking at 15 years. I was looking at 10 years for gang allegations. I was looking at 2 years for gang injunction. I just recently had a sales case to undercover like a month before that so they was trying to give me three years' probation violation plus three years for the case –so I believe it was coming out to more than 15 years.

By the grace of God…I think if it wasn't for me praying, seeking him, I got blessed, it got dropped down from 15 plus years to two years with time off. I did 13 months. I ended up going to, um, Pleasant Valley Prison. I did my time there, of course, I was fighting, fighting demons, you know, trying to get off them bad negative ways and stuff. I got in a few altercations in there. Got in a riot, didn't want to be a part of this stuff but it's hard being in that setting. Thank God I made it out on my release date.

Bobby. *My little thing is kind of, may be, a little different from the rest of the people. I came up in the era where the exodus was going on…and the inner city kids were in the freedom rides. My thing was a gross dislike for the oppressor. We were oppressed and we felt racist things all through grammar school, junior high school, high school and I said that I wasn't going to stand for it. That was my excuse to rebel, you know, against the social structure, school, anything that had any kind of structure, it wasn't for me, okay. Guys hanging on the corner, carefree, that was me, okay. So that's how I end up there* [in prison]. *I got involved in drugs…when that grows…that was a long hard road. That's what kept me in and out the penitentiary, in and out the penitentiary.*

Michael M. *I have been involved in criminality from age 15 to 50. I have been to prison a total of four times—Tehachapi, Susanville, Ironwood, CRC. My crimes were drug related: sales, possession, conspiracy to see—all drug related. I believe the first three times I went to prison I wasn't trying to chance back into a responsible citizen. I just figured in my head that for whatever reason there was something I did wrong why I couldn't get away with what I was doing. I don't know how to explain to…in prison there is no real rehabilitation so if you come in with it in your mind that you're a criminal, there is more than a 90% chance that you are going to leave out thinking your are a better criminal.*

So, the first time I was sentenced (to prison)*—I had never been a product of a gang but I knew all the home boys so I was accepted. I knew everybody in Los Angeles and Venice. At first it was kind of scary even though I thought I was hard core but when I got in there it was really like a vacation. I had friends, some of them were friends, others were associates—we were involved in the same type of behavior so we considered ourselves friends.*

Prison, for me, the first time was fairly a sobering experience but I used drugs and sold drugs and because I had made a kind of a way in life how to do that and live the way I wanted to live—not homeless, dirty or anything like that—I thought everything…well, it was just what I did. When it caught up with me I was facing a lot of years. Because I'm not a stupid or dumb person I just waited and bided my time until I could receive the deal I could accept which was four years—four years, three times, all together it was 12 years. But, because it was my first commitment in a state prison I got all my cases run together and instead of doing 12 years I had to do 28 months, I think it was, before I was released.

I was back home on the street - I chose the streets by choice—I always had a good family, positive role models, really good people around but I also had some from the negative side of life that was living better than the ones on the positive side. Me being the person that I was and letting my mentality go where it was, I sought out the people that was doing more wrong but living a more material life than even my parents or grandparents and people I knew who were living in this community—basically it was about being hard headed. I knew people in that life that had businesses, they had multiple homes, apartment complexes, almost any type of car they wanted, I mean, cash money was available to them. If they needed $8-10,000 they didn't have to go to the bank, they didn't have to go and withdraw anything, they'd just go to their room and get the money. I chose the streets by choice. I never was a robber or burglar, but I was a drug dealer. I didn't want to admit that most of them were successful due to the simple fact they did not use drugs. It took me a long time to understand that and once I came clear on that, you know, really around the third time I went to prison, I start really understanding that… but really on the fourth time I really saw that my life wasn't my life. It was an illusion.

Michael R. *I made my choice. I knew once I went to prison once I know I was going again because I wasn't tired. The first time I did two years; second time, I did four. The third time, I did six. So I knew I wasn't ready to stop being in the streets making money. My choice and decisions was being in the streets making money cause it was right there in front of me and that's all I knew.*

The turning point and desistance.

Lynn. *I'm living a different lifestyle today. It's a big change - you miss –I miss some of the things of the lifestyle we use to live but appreciate life more because life is a lot slower now. You know it makes you appreciate the smaller things in life than you did before. Right now I currently do security work and I host—I have two different jobs. I pay my bills. I take care of my kids. I live a normal life today.*

DissClip 4.04 Michael R. Turning Point

Michael R. *The third time I got out of prison, I knew I wasn't going back. I said I'm done because the laws wasn't the same no more, people didn't play the same game no more, the drugs wasn't the same no more. So, it's like either you're going to spend the rest of your life in prison or you're gonna be dead. So, it's like the scare. I didn't want neither one "so I was in the middle. I backed away from it.*

Bobby. *My turning point? I grew out of it and age. To be perfectly honest with you, got too old to go do it anymore. To do the time, to do the drugs—with your health, you know. I got*

diabetes now; high blood pressure, you know and those things do not co-exist with drugs because the medications that you take is null and void especially with cocaine. It interferes with your medical therapy—so to speak. I got too old to do anything else but collect social security. So that's what I do, I collect social security. I do have a trade. I'm an electrician, appliance repair and all that kind of stuff. I can do that but I don't work, you know. SSI, that's me and that's what I live for right now. You know why? Because I messed up my chances and my things to do years ago, years ago. What I look like at 69 years old, be 69 next month, trying to find a job

A.S. *For me, what made me start to change is like we've all been in prison here before. Everybody I grew up with got life in prison—my serious comrades. The last time I was incarcerated it seemed like I was set up. I had friends telling on me and I had a lot of cops lying on me and I knew from that point on if I ever got out of trouble this time, like dude, you gotta make a big change. So I had to really make that change and I just turned around and walked away on my own. I just had that much courage to just turn around and just walk away. I had to walk from friends, family, the people closes to me. I just had to make it happen on my own. I just had to get out on my own and just cut everything loose.*

I had a real good woman in my life. She took care of just about everything for me until I got my stuff together. A friend that I grew up with told me about a job. He said "Hey dude, you fresh out, you need a job. I got the hook up." I looked into it. It was a job delivering parts for automotive dealers. The guy was willing to hire ex-offenders. You had to have your own truck and work as an independent contractor. I ain't looked back since. I changed my whole environment. I started doing a lot of different things, hanging around with a lot of different people so I wouldn't sink back into my old ways. You have to get out of your area and just go to

visit until you can learn how to maintain and be positive within yourself. To maintain a better environment you just have to get away from whatever you're use to.

Anthony. *So as I was sitting there going through the emotions of the case that I'm facing, my freedom, missing out on family, my relationship and then being in that setting, you know. I knew that being that I'm a known gang member I had to deal with everything that goes on there in jail and I was looking at prison for the first time. I did two years in Pleasant Valley State Prison. [*Two months after Anthony was released he was rearrested for gang injunction violation after the police stopped his cousin, a gang member, and Anthony was in the car with him*.] I did 10 months. Ten months for getting a ride home with my cousin, a known gang member, that hurt so bad. I just found myself like wow, I'm back in prison, a different prison—Avenal state Prison.*

When I came home, I came home to the lady that I was with and we was able to stay at her mom's house for like a year in the process of me working. So in the process of me working with Frank, you know, I started going through the motions of a, you know, my past catching up to me. You know, just mistakes that I was making from the old lifestyle and stuff and I found myself seeking God. You know, while I had my freedom. You know just really seeking him, crying, asking God to forgive me; create in me a new spirit, you know. Til this day I haven't missed a day of prayer since like the ending of 2007 and as I started seeking him more and more I felt change within myself, you know. I started asking Him, 'help me to live for you'. You know, I ended up getting baptized and by the grace of god I've been focused. I've been able to show that there is hope for a person that's been through the streets. All this life, since I've been home, I've been off high risk parole for like at least four years now. I got off high risk parole within my first year and a half cause I was determined not to return.

My first step was mandatory; get a job which I've done. My second step was just to be productive, you know, keep changing.

Making a difference.

A.S. *I was going to the football practices and I'll be seeing those kids out there and I just kept telling myself, I ain't gonna let them be like that. So I asked a dude can I coach and he told me, "No". And I said, "Why? I coach better than all of them or know more than them [referring to other coaches]. He told me, "You're a street nigger. You can't come out here and you can't coach these kids." I was like, "Well you don't even know how to tell my nephew to get in a three point stand—and, I know you." He said, "You can't come out here and coach… you gonna be a bad influence. You're gonna be a dream killer." I said, "Why, because I use to sell drugs? How about I don't do none of that and you give me one chance to coach and if I do…if I mess up, then I can't coach no more." He said, "You can start next year."*

"In two years I won the championship -- that just goes to show you…. I rounded all my buddies' kids that I knew their daddy was dead or in jail and they are going to championship. And, right now they are playing football at the high school with the DA's [district attorney's) son that sent us to prison. How about that?"

Michael M. *Right now today I do the coaching. I mainly work with the girls in cheerleading because you have the men out here today walk past their kids right now and don't support them. They don't go to their games, they don't do anything. I try to change that. I mean I try to be an example for the ones that are still in need. I mean, I wasn't there for my kids when I was in prison. When I got out whatever I had - whatever I had to support them, I did.*

Anthony. *In the process of me being home I've been able to run across an old friend that's a L.A.P.D. (Los Angeles Police Department) and he knows how I use to live; until this day*

he's my good friend. He hasn't changed towards me, not one bit. I'm actually the youth board member for Venice 2000 (a gang intervention and prevention organization). That was a great blessing within itself. You know for me to be a part of the board. I actually got hired to work graffiti removal for ten months. As I was working graffiti removal I loved the job and I love it to this day. I was just smiling and talking to God while I was working, like, 'God, you good. This is what I actually use to do—spray paint on walls'. If I had a marker I would write on anything pretty much. Now, I'm out there covering graffiti with the sprayer and using the sand blaster to clean up the curbs and sidewalks. Cleaning up the street poles and stop signs and all that stuff and I was like, 'wow, God!' I was just talking to Him, you know. I stayed in prayer working that job, it's dangerous but I stayed in prayer asking God to protect me, you know because how I use to live.

I've been home from prison since 2006, November 14. This year, which is 2013 gonna make seven years—November 14 coming up. This been my greatest experience in my life. My life today, I wouldn't trade it for nothing in the world. God is my witness. I got thirty dollars in my pocket, I wouldn't trade it, my life today—two million, three million dollars because He showed me there's a better way of living. It's been so good. I'm into biking; that's one of my hobbies, playing basketball, talking to any kid that I see to encourage them, you know, to focus on productive things.

Papa John. *I have one thing that kind of holds me steadfast to here. If I forget my past, I'm doomed to repeat it. There are times when thing come up but we stay in the program and trust our program to help because until you can take inventory of what ain't no good on yourself or what's been outdated and you discard it, then you cannot put nothing in. See if nothing*

changes, we begin to identify with our past as our greatest asset. One thing I know about my past; it was a good past because it got me to where I am. It teaches me what not to do.

I don't know what to do all the time. But I damn sure know what not to do. I know not to stick that pipe in my mouth. I know not to put that pistol back in my hand. I know not to go back in front of that judge. And with these things, with these kinds of consequences that you constantly look at yourself, I want these youngsters to have someone because they don't have no fathers.

I challenge anybody, if they take the 12 Steps and don't find God, I'll buy their first hit. I'll buy them whatever they want out there because here's the thing: If you take 12 Steps and you work them to the best of your ability, you're going to find God, no doubt about. We give you a wide road and say a God of your understanding. I didn't find out I had emphysema until I got sober. I didn't have no problem when I didn't know about the Lord.

See, it comes down to choices and consequences; we have to make choices and recognize the consequences of our actions in order to lead it so that we can day here's what I do. Here's the choice I make and share with the people: Your word is what keeps you and your word and sharing with others is what keeps you in tune with who you are because we can buy—I can buy the lie that I'm all that and a bag of chips but I'm just a child of God saved by grace. And why me, Lord? Because I got this job to do because he didn't save me from me. He saved me to be an example, to stand out there and say, 'this is what He will do. He did it for me and He will do it for you'.

Bobby. *So everything that I'm talking about I can look back in hindsight and see where I was, you know what I mean? If I can convey that to somebody else, then I can be there and say okay maybe I can stop this person from making the other same move I made. That would be a*

good thing. So I would dedicate myself to try to help somebody, the young coming up, you know. I ain't trying to help nobody with their pants hanging off their butt and already tasted the fruit of real hard banging stuff, you know what I mean. You take a younger child that ain't been affected by it yet and you see that he might be or she might be headed in that direction that's where I think that people can make a better stand, okay. That stand might save a generation. But the generation that's out banging now, you don't want to write them off, per se, you know what I mean, because you'd have to be writing yourself off to do that.

Lynn. *First of all when you have been through so much you can see the wreck coming and I see him* [motioning toward A.S.] *working with them—you can see the stuff they doing. You can see the wreck coming - you know that in 2 or 3 months they are going to be in jail. So if you can talk to them and let them know that they don' have to experience something that you have already experienced, I think that would help some of them; some of them it won't but, I think guidance from people that have experienced everything would be real good for them.*

Without provocation from me, the participants came to a place in their discussions when they realized they needed to do something. It was, again, hearing their voices from the looking glass echoing back to them their own stories. The desire to do a service to the community showed to an even greater degree than the transition to desistance.

Chapter V: Discussion of the Study

Introduction

In this qualitative study conducted in narrative inquiry methodology, eight African American men telling the stories of their lived experiences opens a window into the social phenomena of urban criminality not often heard in the contextual candor and unapologetic realness as in the narrative voices of ex-offenders depicted in this study. The participants ranged in age from 32, the youngest, to 74, the eldest, which also represents a generational range that is reflected in the criminality and worldview of the participants. As an example of the generational difference in views and criminal violations: in the 1960s when Papa John was in his 20s, bookmaking, his first arrest, was a crime for which he received probation, but it is rarely heard of, if at all, in the era of the 1990s, when Anthony was first arrested for gangbanging and related violent crimes.

The studies, concepts, and theories researched in the process of ascertaining available research and answers to the questions posed in the study of *African American Men Who Give Voice to the Personal Transition From Criminality to Desistance* are discussed but more as a backdrop to the storytelling of the participants wherein answers and interpretations of the research questions emerged, distilled and regurgitated from the story telling of lived experiences (Clandinin, 2013; van Manen, 1990).

While it is important to recognize and correlate concepts and theories to demonstrate understanding of these fundamental indicators of scholarly achievement, the objective of this research study is to add to the limited body of work, using narrative inquiry as a methodology and as a "way of understanding experience narratively" (Clandinin, 2013).

Voices adds to the limited body of work by using narrative inquiry methodology to conduct a qualitative, phenomenological research project; by presenting the narrated lived experiences of participants as a contribution to social science research and criminal behavior of some African American men; and by filling a gap in the research by focusing exclusively on African American men and the stories of their lived experiences of criminality as told by them.

Inherent in the participants' stories are behaviors that appear to support the concept that living in poverty, being raised by a single parent, and low self-control are predictors of potential adolescent criminality (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hawkins, 2000). These characteristics may contribute to criminality, but there are a number of other factors that are not identified as criminal propensity that could be contributors, e.g., a learning disability that prevents academic achievement, child abuse, or the situation of having an incarcerated parent.

In participant Anthony's case, for example, it was the influence of his father's reputation that encouraged him to bad behavior and gangbanging. His father was held in high esteem among the gangster element in the community and within his family. The theoretical framework of modeling behavior that one aspires to, whether good or bad, is usually achieved through mentoring, but Anthony's father died when he was eight years old so Anthony shaped his antisocial character by the negative enforcement and acknowledgment he received from the guys on the street who lifted him up publicly just because he was his father's son.

Theories and Concepts

The entry into crime may have been easier for some than others, but in an environment where there are plenty of criminal role models to emulate and to give a vulnerable youth a start in the business, opportunity is attractive, and the prospects are lucrative. Such was the case for participants Tony, A.S., Michael R., Michael M., and Lynn. In the life of an individual, whether

life course, social bonding theory (Glueck & Glueck, 1950; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1983; Sweeten, Piquero, & Steinberg, 2013), or the contrast or correlation with the patterns of age-graded theory of informal social bonds (Sampson & Laub, 1993), it appears that life is so complex it is not possible to attach a label or invariant definition that would remain consistent over a period of time to one's experiences or behaviors .

Although Glueck and Glueck's (1950) data and longitudinal study supporting their theory of age-graded informal social control is very important and significant to the social research community, there are challenges to the limitations in the interpretation of the data. In analyzing the Gluecks's data, Sampson and Laub (1993) theorized that the significance of age-graded social bonding and informal social controls extended beyond adolescence to adulthood and defined this perspective as life-course theory.

The life course has been defined as "pathways through the age differentiated life span," where age differentiation "is manifested in expectations and options that impinge on decision processes and the course of events that give shape to life stages, transitions, and turning points" (Elder as cited in Sampson & Laub, 1993, p. 8).

Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) posed a different challenge to the Glueck and Glueck (1950) theory. They maintained in their studies that there are far too many variables contributing to the behaviors of adolescents to attribute crime over the life course specifically to age and changes in social control and bonds. They made three provocative claims:

> First, noting the appearance of the age-crime curve across history, cultures, and demographic groups, they asserted that it is invariant across these categories (the invariance hypothesis). Second, they asserted that the covariates of crime are the same at all ages (the non-interactive hypothesis. Finally, and most provocatively, they claimed: "the age distribution of crime cannot be accounted for by any variable or combination of variables currently available to criminology (Gottfredson & Hirschi as cited in Sweetenet al., 2013, p. 922).

Because there were challenges to the credibility of the Glueck and Glueck (1950) data, to debunk rumors of manipulation and fudged data, John Laub, in a recorded interview (see *Crime in the Making, p. 264)* attested to the accuracy of the Gluecks's data collection processes and methodology as well as the integrity of the researchers. Laub personally participated in the recoding of data that was initially coded and processed using card technology that had since become antiquated and useless for readability, e.g., think about documents produced by a typewriter versus documents produced by computer or files stored in physical cabinets versus stored in virtual clouds.

The change in technology required the restoring, supplementing, and validating of the voluminous data concerning the *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency* and all of the follow-up data of the original 1,000 cases (Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Researching what makes a criminal and the causes and continuity of criminal behavior has been concentrated on early childhood and teenage years, mostly ignoring the other end of the criminality spectrum, i.e., desistance from crime and the transition from criminal behavior to non-criminal behavior which is discussed extensively in the context of life course theory (Sampson & Laub, 1993).

Although there are many concepts and social theories of crime causation, some which have aspects of correlation to others and others that present a different interpretation of data or even the meaningfulness of data, it is generally accepted that there is no one variable, life event, or circumstances that can be accountable for the onset of criminal behavior, the continuation of criminal behavior over a life course, or changes in crime with age. Sweeten et al. (2013) claim that "the relationship between age and crime in adolescence and early adulthood is largely

explainable, though not entirely attributable to multiple co-occurring development changes (p. 921).

It is clear that the research and studies concerning concepts and theories of causes, persistence, and desistance relative to criminal behavior are so extensive and varied with different perspectives, nuances, and reinterpretations that each area is a research study within its own specificity, which is not the scope or capability of this study.

The Cause and Choices of Criminal Behavior

Just as there are multiple theories and concepts that can be compared and contrasted with criminal behaviors, there are multiple causes and contributing factors to the onset of crimes. The participants reveal in their stories that conscious choice is a huge factor particularly when assessing the burdensome difficulties and barriers to mainstream reentry against the choice to persist in the familiar and adapted world of crime (Maruna, 2011). Participant Michael M. explained that in his time he could make $100-$300 or more an hour handling illegal drugs so a minimum wage job held no attraction for him. Once he acquired a criminal record, getting a legitimate job proved impossible, and that fact served to justify and perpetuate his crimes for many years. Each arrest, conviction, and prison sentence sunk him deeper into anti-social behavior and criminality, entrenching the barriers to reentry, i.e., preventing access to employment, housing, social services as well as severing relationships and family ties. The criminal lived experiences of each participant were lucrative, highly productive, rich in the acquisition of material gain, i.e., cars, jewelry, homes, travel, accolades and power—at a price. It was a price that participants were either willing or compelled to pay with the inevitability of arrest, conviction, and incarceration. The reality is that each decision to choose criminality over desistance diminished opportunity to reintegrate and increased opportunity to recidivate.

Out of the eight participants, five had served sentences in youth authority (minimum security corrections facility) before the age of 24 years. Often the social stigma and the hardships imposed by criminal actions in their youth actually commit them to continuing deviant behaviors as society, penal policies, and laws prohibiting services and support to ex-felons, providing no way out. Also, social services are extremely limited in the urban areas to where most ex-offenders return after release from prison (Goodstein, 1979; Travis, 2001; The Urban Institute, 2003; Thompson, 2008)

During the years and at the time of the crime ventures of the participants in *Voices* there was no researcher, observer, historian, sociologist or criminologist tracking and recording their lives as they happened. Their stories are rebuilt and recited from the annals of their minds to the best of their recall and ability to put voice to story but, perhaps, not always in the chronology in which events occurred (Chapman, 2005; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; van Manen, 1990).

As the researcher, I attempted to listen and hear through the voice of the storyteller and not, at the moment, attach interpretation to experience, not only because I was not readily clear at times with the colloquialisms of the streets but also to avoid hermeneutical incorrectness when participants reviewed their stories (Zahavi, 2003). As I listened, mulled over, analyzed, and interpreted through my own lens and social justice mindset, the phenomena lived and relived itself in story by these African American men. These men sat across from me, speaking their past and recreating it in the now of the moment, looking like any average guy. In fact, they were ex-felons, survivors of decades of risky and sometimes violent businesses; they were sons, fathers, football coaches, drug counselors, electricians, bicycle enthusiasts, and legitimate business men. All once lived a life rife with criminal activity, but each eventually found the way

to the process and sustaining of a desisting lifestyle (Brye & Trew, 2008; Bushway et al., 2001; Bushway, Thornberry, & Krohn, 2003; Maruna, 2008).

Narrative Inquiry as Social Science Methodology

Narrative inquiry is a relational research methodology (Clandinin, 2007) that requires trust, corroboration, genuineness of intention and response, to name a few characteristics essential to the performance of the process. My association over the time of the interviews and focus groups grew to a level of familiarity and trust that created a relaxed and easy environment for storytelling and conversations for them and me.

I gained vivid insight into the lives of the participants and their former criminal behaviors that was exceedingly clearer in voice than the text about age-graded theory of informal social control (Sampson & Laub, 1993) written in *Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points Through Life* and other books and journals that largely built upon and/or challenged the data and studies, particularly the *Unraveling of Juvenile Delinquency* (Glueck & Glueck, 1950) conducted by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck, the Harvard Law School husband and wife criminology research team, addressed earlier in this paper.

Although their stories are individual, personal and reflective of their own pathways, there is commonality of life trajectories within this group very likely because most knew one another, lived or socialized in the same communities, were involved in illegal drug related crimes at some level in their lives, and developed friendly associations formed during the focus groups where they openly shared their stories and experiences, including prison terms and turning points.

As qualitative methodology, the narrative inquiry research does not, nor is it intended to, support generalization of any trends or outcomes. The intent of narrative inquiry is to seek meaning and to understand the experiences of participants. Toward this end, similar actions and

what appears as common characteristics in the lived experiences of the participants surfaced in the stories and can be aligned, to some extent, with existing concepts and theories which give insight and meaning to the possible cause of the participants' criminal behavior.

- The influence of negative socio-economic conditions in the community and pressure from peers to engage in criminal behaviors
- Influenced by the money and material assets that could be acquired through criminal activity, such as the sale of drugs.
- Gang participation and/or affiliation in adolescence which is a strong institution of informal social control that continues into adulthood.
- The absence of a father, father figure. or male role model, central and causal to the deviant behavior in adolescence, continuing as an emotional and psychological impairment into adulthood.
- Having both parents in the home was not a deterring factor for adolescent deviant behavior, but being raised by a single mom appeared to be a contributing factor to deviant behavior
- Institutional social controls, such as having employment, romantic relationship, and children aid in the desistance process but does not guarantee termination of criminal behavior.
- Knowing the risk and inevitability of arrest, conviction, and incarceration did not deter criminal activity, even after serving a prison sentence. All participants served at least two separate prison terms in a California state prison. (See their stories in Chapter IV.)

The Process and Experience of Telling and Interpreting Participants' Stories

In the beginning of the *Voices* research, I set out to interview individuals who met the participant criteria for the study: ex-felons who had served multiple prison sentences, overcome barriers to reentry, successfully desisted from crime and recidivism for a minimum of three years, and were willing to tell their personal stories of successful reentry and desistance.

I researched the meaning of narrantology, narrative analysis, narrative versus story, storytelling versus reporting of information, and narrative inquiry (Chapman, 2005; Clandinin, 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Kenny, 2005; Mishler, 1990). (See Chapter II).

The qualitative methodology, in general, has come a long way in acceptance in the scientific community and so, too, has narrative inquiry since its emergence from the initial studies of Clandinin and Connelly (1990) with classroom teachers trying to find a way to narratively express experiential knowledge.

I have found it to be an invaluable methodology to capture not only the expression of the self through narrative inquiry story telling but also the meaning of the expression as only the storyteller can speak it. I do not know of, nor have I encountered in my research, any other methodology, quantitative or qualitative, where the process is organic between researcher and participant as it proved to be in this research study. The participant/researcher-participant relationship allowed deep diving into the untapped reservoir of feelings that came forth from the participants as if they were waiting to be asked—waiting to tell the story of themselves because they had never heard about themselves aloud like this, their stories told in their own voices.

In uninhibited candor in the tinged prose and vernacular of their street life, participants spoke, mostly uninterrupted, of the life they lived. They told stories of negative behaviors that shuffled them down the path of criminality to the consequence of multiple arrests, convictions,

and incarcerations that riddled their lives from adolescence to adulthood up to the conscious choice of desistance.

Body language spoke where words did not—furrowed brows; sometimes dancing, sometimes stilled eyes; hands flicking and shaking off something remembered but not spoken; quick staccato speech or slow and measured voice; suspended thought; body repositioning; and sustained pauses in story—all insights into the ex-offender storyteller—snippets of the lived experiences shared, but not spoken.

I wondered as the storyteller sat across from me, video camera rolling, if he visualized the telling of his lived experiences like editing scenes in a movie in which he was the principal actor but that he had never watched until now— living in, while living out his story.

The Looking Glass of the Researcher: Learning, Perspectives, and Change

The men shared something with me, in answer to a question that caused me to shift my perspective on causal effects of racial discrimination in the onset and persistence of crime by some African American men. Each told that although they had experienced racial profiling, for example, been subjected many times to stop and frisk procedures, stopped many times for no reason other than driving while Black, detained for meeting the description of someone who committed a crime, and other racially discriminatory harassments, that their decision to become involved in criminal activities had nothing to do with their racially motivated confrontations and negative interactions with the police. There were other reasons and causes, but police harassment did not contribute to their decision to begin committing crimes. What a shocking revelation to me.

I asked the question because I heard nothing in the stories about encounters with racially discriminatory police actions prior to committing their initial crime—only after arrests. There

were no lived experiences expressed about protests or defiance against unwarranted searches or unlawful assemblage. What? No one mentioned police harassment or wrongful detainment as a precursor to or causal effect on criminal behavior? I had not realized that I still had a deep rooted mental model of police-community relations formed by movements and protests in the 1960s race riots and civil rights activism in my community—the same community where most of the participants were born and raised. Imagine my undoing when I realized that I'm still angry about the time my uncle was arrested for confronting a white man who called him a nigger. I still feel the unsettling of emotions when I think about my sister and I becoming caught up in a police-instigated riot because Black people would not leave Will Rogers Park in Watts, CA in 1966. I wrote my first successful grant that summer. It was funded by the federal government to bring summer jobs into the Venice community and urban areas across the country to hopefully quell the angry protests and violence due to civil rights injustices, poverty, high unemployment, and all the ills of segregated, disenfranchised communities.

Voices—both the research study and the storytellers—let me know that times have changed. I knew this on a conscious level, but deep in my sub-conscious sit the causes and the emotions that triggered my advocacy for African American men against the penal system 49 years ago!

I know from their answers and the stories of their lived experiences that other circumstances, conditions, and people spirited them into crime. The police seemed to be incidental to their criminal behaviors; they knew eventually they would have to deal with the police but it was expected. Their attitudes about having served multiple prison sentences was incredible. They knew it would happen, and they took it in stride. It is no wonder when, 1in 3

Black males born today can expect to go to prison (Mauer & King, 2007). (Read participant stories in Chapter IV).

The participants seemed to have adopted the mindset of normalizing police interaction, arrest, and the subsequent situations; whether it meant long periods in the county jail awaiting trial or the probability of convictions and sentencing to prison—it was the nature of the business. Of course they don't like it and they tried "to stay under the radar," but drug dealing and gangbanging are public contact events. Their lifestyles were a risk, and retribution was expected. A.S. said he was not worried about getting in trouble or going to jail when he was an adolescent. At that time, at the age of 19, the experience of youth authority "was really not a lot of difference from being on the streets. All my homies were there." He had no way of knowing that public policy and get tough on crime campaigns by elected officials would change the sentencing laws to harsher and more lengthy sentences (Tonry, 1999, 2006).

The attitudes and behaviors of the African American men in this study set the standards for criminalized youth in the community today, and the manifestation of that realization by them encouraged their pledge to make a difference in the lives of young people in the community, presenting a fearsome challenge to me when asked if I would assist in their effort by helping to organize and facilitate planning meetings.

New Perspectives

As a result of the stories and pragmatic conversations defining the how and why of their willful criminal offenses, the impact of crime in our communities today and the pledge of the participants to be instrumental, to the level of their ability, to change the trajectories of youth in the community, I am rethinking my long-standing opinions regarding the unfair arrest and incarceration of African American men. I know that discrimination and racism exist in the

criminal justice system and contributes to the disproportionate number of African American men in the world's largest prison system, the United States of America, but the participants, when asked, stated that racial discrimination, e.g., police harassment, stop and frisk, false charges, and other profiling practices did not influence them to become criminals. However, disadvantages and disenfranchising factors in their community were contributory—hunger will make a person steal. Fancy cars, diamond rings, and pockets full of money are enticing to some people, and if there is a way for them to have some of the same, they will take it.

While it was not the affront to police discrimination that caused the foray into criminality by the participants in *Voices*, it is the effects of discriminatory and racially bias laws and practices that created the blight and the unemployment and the lack of resources that invited them in to criminal behavior as youth and adolescents. These often blighted urban areas of America are heavily populated by people of color, mostly African Americans and Hispanics, respectively, who, because of their stage in life, are more likely to be arrested, more likely to be sentenced to jail or prison, and more likely to be incarcerated. It was a conscious choice as adults to persist outside the law while still living in the community, but it was one that was easier to make than change to desistance at the time. The return to these deficit communities and having received no rehabilitation or job training while incarcerated and being unequipped to deal with the challenges and barriers to reentry is what initiates the vicious cycle of arrest, sentencing, and recidivism. It is not a problem in one community but in thousands of communities across this country where every day more than 700,000 prisoners are released to return (Marbley & Ferguson, 2005).

I asked this question of the participants, and I ask the reader as part of my lived experience in this study: Where else and under what other circumstances in the United States

could you have over 7.0 million people (Mauer & King, 2007) affected by anything and there not be an outcry from the country? I hear no outcry. I see no outrage: no grand protest or march about the millions of marginalized people that are under some law enforcement statute, policy, or legislative act that controls what they can do, where they can go, whether they can vote or not, and where they can live, as well as restricting or denying employment opportunities, eligibility for student loans and, therefore, access to education and training. Homelessness poses an additional risk because ex-felons in many states are not eligible for low-income housing. Where is a person, who is lucky if he can even get a minimum wage job, supposed to live? If his family lives in low income housing, they will get evicted if he is allowed to live with them so where is he supposed to go? Half-way houses are transitional living arrangements where a person released from prison can live for 90 days to 120 days; supposedly enough time to get a job and situate in a permanent living space. That is ridiculous. What is the answer?

Making a Difference

> We cannot simply prosecute or incarcerate our way to becoming a safer nation. Today, a vicious cycle of poverty, criminality and incarceration traps too many Americans and weakens too many communities. However, many aspects of our criminal justice system may actually exacerbate this problem, rather than alleviate it. (The Sentencing Project, 2013)

President George W. Bush signed into law the Second Chance Act of 2007. Prisoner Reentry Initiative provides for the creation of programs specifically designed to assist communities "to develop and implement comprehensive and collaborative strategies to address the challenges posed by offenders' reentry and recidivism reduction" (Second Change Act of 2007, H.R. 1593/S.1060). However, funding is limited and not enough to make a sustaining difference in communities. The problems are vast and pervasive and require long range plans

and years of efforts to fix. It will take a monumental coordinated effort, but it can start with community investment.

Professor Marbley has answers for getting to some of the problems in communities created by massive numbers of prisoners returning home and encountering nearly insurmountable barriers. Her answers call for the collaborative efforts of communities and strategic alliances with stakeholders including the

> criminal, judicial, political, and legal systems; and families and community groups to develop competencies and mobilize resources to provide unified service to reform criminal rehabilitation (Marbley & Ferguson, 2005, p. 633)

Such a call sounds like the beginning of a framework for a plan that addresses many of the issues of brokenness in communities like the ones the participants came from and where some still live, work, and/or play. The fact that participants still have family or other social ties there makes it even more imperative that they involve themselves in the investment of youth and the reconstruction of the institution of community. I am impressed with the model for rehabilitation presented by Marbley and Ferguson (2005) because it provides a framework and direction for action and potential resolution unlike many of the research articles and studies that identify a problem and frame it in pages of statistical data and behavioral theory but offer no suggested remedy for the identified problem.

The Participants Discuss Making a Difference

In the round-table discussion the participants discussed among themselves ways in which they might contribute to influencing change among youth—young men and women—who were living lives that may ultimately lead to incarceration or, if they were already in the system, how to avoid further trouble. Michael M. suggested that something had to be done because the problem was really bad. The discussion about social reform for youth in the community was

unexpected but a welcomed output of the shared experiences in the group discussion. I asked them what could be done. What did each one think they could do to help a young person. They were thinking about it when Michael R. and A.S. verbalized the challenging circumstances that must have been on their minds.

> *"You get caught [up]…it's the same cycle. Once you get confused in that mindset, it's hard to get that out. It takes, like Mike said, you just gotta get tired of being tired." (Michael R.)*

> *"See what you gotta understand is, I'm one of the last that just got out of being with them—10 years ago—so what I'm telling right now, it's like bro, it's hard for me to try to woo and reel all these guys in ,,, we can't exist in the same room together for a long period of time cause we get antsy and get upset cause we don't want to listen or hear that because it's so much [other stuff] they got going on in trying to take care of themselves and stuff. They caught up thinkin' and in that zone, that money zone, that gotta get paid zone".*

I said we know the problem, what is the answer? A.S. responded:

> *The answer is you need to get back to the basics. Half of them don't have no family orientation growing up. They have no respect. They have no understanding of what an older person is to a younger person—that means when I was growing up you can walk down the street and say, 'Hi, Mr. such and such'. It's not like that now.*

The concern in their voices expressed the doubt of what was possible and that there were also limitations to how far each would go to make change happen. As I watched their faces seeming to reflect on the conversations, I wondered if they were thinking about how hard it was

for them to change and who or what would have made a difference for them sooner than later in their lives. In the end, the participants stated what they were willing to do to help young people.

- A.S. and Michael R. will continue working with the youth football and cheer groups.
- Bobby wants to work with children of elementary school age—the ones that don't have their pants below their butts.
- Papa John will use his resources to take kids periodically on recreational trips.
- Michael M. will help with counseling.
- Anthony will help organize youth activities, teach kids about biking, and organize rides along the bike paths.
- Lynn will help with counseling and sports activities.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

In narrative inquiry research there is always the risk that the hermeneutics of the participants will not be fully understood and interpreted so that it comports exactly to what the narrator intended. This is the risk the researcher takes. To limit the risk of misinterpretation of meaning, I became familiar with the subject, the participants, and the research methodology and stayed open to new perspectives offered by participants and to learning new information.

There are eight participants in the study, which, by sheer numbers, seems a small sample, but the purpose of the study was not to generalize results "but to elaborate complexities and relationships in the service of understanding human life" (Kenny, 2005, p. 416). The age range and difference of the participant and the stories of their lived experiences reflected the societal culture and attitudes towards crime in their generation.

Drugs have always been a problem, but in the 1980s the possession and sale of drugs rose to the level of big business, particularly for gangs. The Rockefeller Drug Laws instituted harsher

and longer sentences for drug possession and cited crack cocaine to receive a harsher sentence than the powder form of cocaine. That one law alone sent thousands of young African America men and women to prison. Many are still serving time as a result of three convictions, in violation of the three strikes law, and some are convicted for life.

The participants were convicted and served at least once for drug sales, and five participants served more than one prison term for drug related crimes. Fortunately, they all reach the turning point which they talk about in Chapter IV and have desisted from criminal activity for many years. The longest period of desistance is by Papa John the oldest participant whose last criminal act was 25 years ago. Participants have desisted as follows: A.S.,11 years; Tony,13 years; Michael M., 8 years; Lynn, 5 years; Michael R., 6 years; Anthony, 6 years; and Bobby, 10 years. There is still debate about the term of desistance and when absence of committing a crime can be defined as termination which has finality in meaning contrary to the desistance being generally accepted as a process, not a discrete event. The participants assert they have quit crime and have no desire or expectation to return to that lifestyle.

I would have liked for content in the stories to reflect on the ways in which ex-offenders were able to overcome barriers to reentry as that is one of my research questions posed in the outset of the study and I think readers would be looking for how that question is handled in the dissertation. One reason their stories about overcoming barriers is sparse is because on most occasions of reentry their interest was on resuming their criminal life, not overcoming barriers to reentry. The fact that they continued their criminality after release from prison is evidenced by their re-arrest and imprisonment. Their stories of lived experiences, which they were free to tell as they deemed important or relevant, did not express much about reentry. However, in telling the story of their turning points, it was clear that once the participant made up his mind to desist

from crime, reentry barriers were no longer insurmountable and success was no longer non-negotiable.

It is not my intent to minimize the importance of the discussion regarding reentry as it is the focus of researchers, social workers, and legislators as they struggle with what to do with thousands of prisoners being released from overcrowded prisons every day. It is a multi-faceted social problem that is one of the consequences of mass incarceration, particularly of African Americans and Hispanics. According to the Bureau of Justice 2011 Report, the total state and federal prison population was approximately 1.6 million (Guerino et al., 2010). Approximately 1.4 million of that total represents the state prison population; California had a state prison population of 149,569 prisoners which reflected a decrease from the 2010 total because of 15,493 prisoners being released by court order to decrease overcrowding in the prisons.

It's reasonable to expect that the offense records racked up during the adolescent period and the multiple arrests and incarcerations in adulthood would make reentry and reintegration tremendously difficult and disheartening (Bahr et al., 2005; Foster, 2001; Travis, 2001; Thompson, 2008) for any of the participants.

What I concluded from the lived experiences of the participants' past and the living they are doing now, is that the first step to successful reentry is the decision to desist from criminal behavior. I believe that the way to a frame of mind for desistance is to change criminal behavior; to change criminal behavior one has to stop condemning himself for his past. When one no longer condemns oneself, he can redeem himself—no longer consumed by criminality. Redemption is transforming (Giordano, 2002).

It is clear in my mind that substandard living conditions, poverty, failed education systems, poor health, mental illness, high unemployment, and other socio-economic factors are

contributors to antisocial and criminal behaviors. Although the participants did not discuss racial discrimination as contributory to the onset of their criminal behavior, there is evidence that communities that are predominantly minority suffer deprivation of economic, social, education, and psychological resources and nurturing that tend to foster incidents of criminal behavior.

But, I also believe in the stamina and resilience of African American families. While this study focuses on the lives and stories of eight African American men who lived criminal lives for many years, there are thousands of individuals and hundreds of families of in these communities who work hard, raise their children and live productive lives as responsible citizens.

Thanks to their transition, these eight men are also among the ranks of productive, responsible citizens. I am proud of their personal achievements and their pledge to work with young people. I look forward to helping in that effort.

Future Work

As stated above, the participants have indicated a desire to work with young people in the community to help guide them in positive directions. A.S. and Michael R. are already working with the youth football team and cheer leaders. Anthony routinely talks to youth about staying in school and out of trouble. He uses his interest in music and cycling as a segue to conversations with kids he runs into on the streets.

I was asked to help organize their efforts to form a support group to meet the objective of working with youth and to facilitate the meetings. I have agreed to do so. I will ask their permission to journal the process, to observe their actions and interactions, take notes and record activities for a follow up study to *Voices.* I will see how it goes and if there is initiative on their part to follow through.

Regardless of the response or whether their pledge really manifests into work with the youth, I will continue my work as a social justice researcher/practitioner/activist in the community.

It is my hope that someday there will be a robust body of qualitative literature that documents the voices of African American men and women ex-offenders and their journey to desistance so that finally a scholarly comparing and contrasting among studies can begin. This study is a start.

Chapter VI: Implications for Leadership and Change

I asked the question in the Introduction of this dissertation: What are the stories that reflect the experiences of men who have lived their lives committing crimes, who served prison sentences, returned home and had to face all of the personal hardships and social barriers of reentry and yet were successful? I followed with the question: Who better to answer than the formerly incarcerated who have managed to make the transition from criminality to desistance and, therefore, finally free themselves from the cycle of recidivism?

It is a passionate subject for me for several reasons: I know many people who have been and some who still are incarcerated; I have relatives who are incarcerated; the statistical data and research regarding criminology focus on incarceration and recidivism, but not much about successful reentry and desistance; and I wanted to know more about the latter two trajectories.

Narrative inquiry is the best research methodology to address the research question and to elicit the lived experiences through the stories of African American men who met the criteria for participation in the study. I am specifically interested in the research and study of criminal behavior, recidivism, and desistance, concerning African American men, and I believe the research question was addressed and answered fully.

The narrative inquiry methodology and the stories of the participants added a dimension and interest to the research that went further than simple and direct answers. Is there a clear understanding of the criminality of these African American men and is the reader able to feel the reality of the lived-experiences told through the storyteller? I believe so. I am biased as the researcher, but when I read their stories, in their words, I see who they are then and in the

present. Their stories are authentic and organic and are as much a part of them as their arms and legs—that is how it is with narrative inquiry.

Each turning point marks a personal and individual experience, different for each participant. It does not matter how each turning point presented itself or how it was embraced, for each represents a milestone that marked the pivotal point of change from criminality to desistance for each participant. The individual stories reflect the emotionalism and the meaningfulness of the occurrence of the turning point and where it took them to as a changed person. Each was profound because it represented a conscious choice at the fork in the road for many of them. Had they not made that choice, desistance would not be a way of life for them. Did the study answer the question of the personal transition experience from criminality to desistance? I say, a clear and resounding yes.

. I feel that the study sufficiently addressed the question of how the participants overcame barriers to entry. There is not a specific section title as such but in the stories of each participant's experience.

A.S. speaks of an aunt who gave him a place to stay and a woman who was really in his corner. A friend told him about a job, and once he became employed, in his words, "I haven't looked back." Bobby stopped using drugs, and he lived in a sober living home until he got his own low income apartment. Anthony lived with his girlfriend and her mother. He says his faith in God helped him through the tough times. He has a construction job. Michael M. works for a non-profit organization and manages a sober living home. Papa John owns and operates three sober living homes. Lynn says he works, pays his bills, and takes care of his family. Tony owns his own truck and works as a contractor delivering produce throughout the state. Based on their

narratives, the avenues through which the participants were able to overcome barriers are assistance from friends and family, housing, employment and spirituality.

Learning and Benefits From the Study

I am changed by the study, the stories, and the interaction with the participants. What an experience this was for me. The knowledge and insights gained from the narrative inquiry research experience broadened my understanding of crime and its development in the life course of these African American men. Their stories and my position as the researcher allowed me to see the landscape of criminality from a changed perspective. I came into the study as the practitioner/activist, and I am transitioning from this study as a researcher/practitioner/activist with a charge to assist eight African American men who gave voice (and meaning) to the personal transition from criminality to desistance and who want to change the life course of youth in their community.

What I have come to understand more clearly during this study—and it is very different thinking from when I started—is that the pathway to reentry and to desistance, more than anything else, is conscious choice to change. Formalized and accessible resources must be available to support that decision and to provide "foot hold"[6] support in housing and employment, family counseling, drug counseling, treatment and other resources needed to support the change, but first the decision to change has to be made.

The narrative inquiry process was gratifying for the participants. They appreciated the opportunity to tell their stories, and I think it gave them an awareness that they had not cognitively experienced. Their discussion and expressed desire to work with young people was a demonstration of the awareness of their self-value as well as recognition that they had

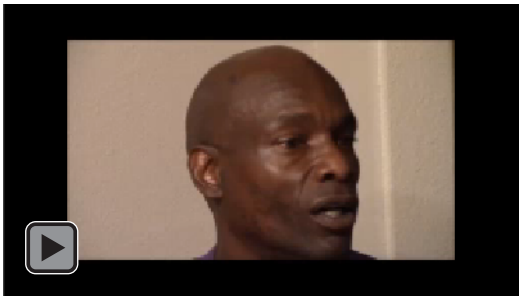
[6] Foot hold is a term I coined to mean that the person must have enough sustained support to be stabilized, i.e. to gain a foot hold instead of short term 90-120 days that is really only temporary assistance and not enough time to get established.

something worthy and meaningful to offer. I think that is monumental considering from where they have been in their criminality. It was gratifying for me, also. I learned so much doing the work and am pleased that the participants learned from one another and me.

At the end of the study, I no longer referred to the men as ex-offenders; instead, they were participants. They have not forgotten their past as their stories of lived experiences so vividly conveys, but they seemed to have embraced the separation from the former life. I see that more convincingly from those who have the most years of desistance, but each one seems personally sure of continued success.

Conclusion

DissClip 6.01 Sherwood Leading Change



The most significant contribution of this research is the candid and authentic stories told by individuals who lived the life and came to a personal transformation that some had never experienced—self-redemption, freedom from criminal activity, and the self-esteem to know that they can contribute constructively to others. This contribution alone has the potential to affect the lives of others who have experienced similar lives of antisocial behavior, criminal acts, and imprisonment. If these eight men can achieve successful transition after the many years of criminal violations, arrests, convictions, incarcerations, parole supervision, injunctions, separation from family and friends, joblessness, and, sometimes, homelessness, so, too, can others.

Appendix

Appendix A: Participant Consent Form

Naomi Nightingale
Antioch University
PhD in Leadership and Change

Participant Consent Form

Study: African American Men Who Give Voice to the Personal Transition from Criminality to Desistance

My name is Naomi Nightingale and I am a student in the PhD in Leadership and Change program at Antioch University, Yellow Springs, OH. The focus of my studies in the doctorate program, generally, is African American men and the penal system.

I. Purpose of the Study:

The research is to fill a gap in the research regarding African American men effort is to satisfy a course requirement to expand research, knowledge and inquiry of the subject to a more global audience of researchers and practitioners. Specifically, the goal is to learn about factors that contribute to successful re-entry for parolees and their desistence from recidivism (reincarceration). I am interested in your life experiences, what challenges did you encounter upon your release from prison, how did you overcome the challenges and barriers, and what influences, support, resources; have contributed to your desistance from recidivism after your release from prison?

II. Voluntary Participation:

Your participation is voluntary and you are requested to participate because you have a history of incarceration and recidivism and have stated that you have desisted from crime and recidivism for a time period for three years or more. You may withdraw from participation at any time without explanation or negative consequence.

III. What Are You Being Asked to Do?

You are asked to participate in one or more individual interviews to share your life experiences, specifically post prison release, to the extent you are comfortable doing so. You may choose not to participate without negative consequence in any session or form of research or to terminate your participation if you start an interview and decide you do not want to continue. Each interview session will be scheduled by me, your researcher, well in advance and at a mutually convenient time and location. Interviews will usually be scheduled for two hours with breaks convenient to you; however, your comfort is important so time will be flexible and according to your needs. You will be asked questions related to your criminal offenses, your incarceration experience, previous recidivism, your experiences after your release(s) relating to housing, employment, education and training, family and community and what you believe has influenced and assisted your success in desistance from crime/recidivism. The interviews will be primarily unstructured as I am interested in your story comfortably told; however, I will ask questions that focus on specific areas of interest mentioned above and also may ask you to elaborate on a subject you bring forward in your story.

Some listed questions you may be asked or subject areas in which I am interested as we attempt to determine what made it possible for you to successfully re-enter society after your release from prison and enabled you to maintain your freedom from re-incarceration are:

- How long was your prison term?
- How many times did you return to prison before your last release?
- Was your re-incarceration for a parole violation or for a new offense?
- How long has it been since the end of your last prison term?
- What challenges/barriers did you experience in adjusting to re-entry?
- What support services did you receive after your release?
- What are the elements of success for you?
- What happened to make you change from criminal to a non-offender? Do you recall that "turning point" in your life?
- What most influenced your ability to sustain desistance from crime and recidivism?

I will take notes during the interview and tape record sessions. I may also video tape the interview. Before digital voice recording or video recording an interview I will ask your consent to do so. You will have the opportunity to review your comments before I submit the research study to the Chair of my Dissertation Committee at Antioch University.

IV. Potential Risks and Discomforts

By your participation in this study and discussing your past and/or your present life situations and circumstances you may experience emotional distress of some sort, e.g., anger, depression, sadness. If so, I will stop the interview and not proceed until and if you are ready to do so

V. Potential Benefits of Participation:

The study will provide the basis for more research in the area of reentry and desistance for African American men and may lead to the eventuality of assisting community based organizations and practitioners in tailoring support services to best achieve and sustain desistance goals. In addition this research may have the effect of transferability that will influence others to deter from criminal behaviors so as to avoid the devastating stigma of a felon in the American society

VI. Confidentiality of Information

I will use the information and the lived experiences expressed in your story telling in the development of a research study using narrative inquiry in my dissertation titled *African American Men Who Give Voice to the Personal Transition from Criminality to Desistance* that focuses on factors that contribute to sustained reentry and desistance from crime/recidivism by African American male ex-offenders. Your name will not be listed in the research study portion incorporated in the dissertation unless you give your written consent to do so. All information will be kept confidential so you may feel free to tell me about your experiences. Any information that can identify you will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Although recruitment for volunteers will exclude persons with sex offenses or child abuse/molestation I will not ask about this in any session; however, if you tell me about any of these offenses or tell me about a serious intent to physically harm or kill someone, the law requires that it must be reported to the proper authorities. If you volunteer information about an immediate intent to harm yourself, I may need to break your confidentiality to take efforts to ensure your safety.

VII. Your Rights and How to Contact the Project

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation in this study without penalty. If you have questions regarding your rights as a study participant or if you want additional information about the study, you may contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board at Antioch University, Dr. Carolyn Kenny at ckenny@phd.antioch.edu or at telephone number 805-618-1903. You may also contact the Principal Investigator of the study, Naomi Nightingale at nnightingale@antioch.edu or at telephone number 310-663-6694.

==========

Signature of study participant: My signature below indicates that I have read this consent form or had it read to me. I understand the information it contains and I willingly agree to take part in this study.

_____ _____

Your name (Print) Date

_____

Your signature

Signature of Interviewer: In my judgment the participant is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent to participate in this study. The participant voluntarily signed this consent form in my presence.

_____ _____

Name of Interviewer (Print) Date

_____

Signature of Interviewer

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